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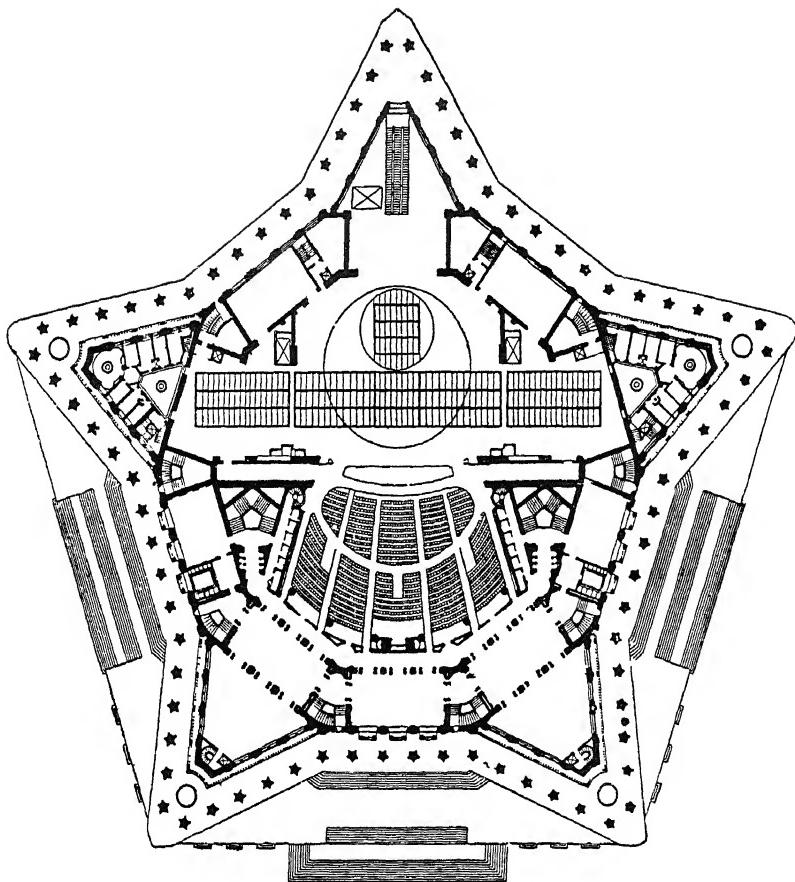
THE NEW  
SOVIET THEATRE

*By the same Author*

OVERTURE TO CAMBRIDGE

A Satirical Novel





Ground plan of the new building, Central Theatre of the Red Army,  
Moscow.

*See Appendix I, p. 219.*

# THE NEW SOVIET THEATRE

*by*

JOSEPH MACLEOD

London

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## CHAPTER I

### Introductory and Personal

I CANNOT claim that this book will be more than an interim report. Certainly, the matter of it may be new to many readers; but this has been accumulated over five years more by head and hand than by eye and ear. Certainly, the subject is important to all who have human culture and human individuality at heart. But communications and opportunities of visiting the Soviet Union in recent years have been infrequent. Certainly, also, the very speed of development and rapid changes in the Soviet Theatre may make it seem arbitrary to fix any point at which a survey of its growth can usefully be made.

And yet some account must be written; so in the absence of any from better-qualified people, I am attempting it myself.

There are many books and articles about the Soviet Theatre in its Revolutionary period, the exciting terseness of the Proletcult, the dynamism of Meierhold, and all those other frenzied theatre Solons who codified theatre laws for newly freed townsfolk. There are many books and articles about the aesthetic delights of the formalist period, when abstract sets worthy of Leger or Braque with strange chaos of bits and pieces used to frame behind desiccated units of humanity the collectivism of the crowd. But I know of no book since Norris Houghton's *Moscow Rehearsals* which even alludes to the fading of these ideas from the Soviet stage, certainly none which gives any detailed account of the astonishing tasks it has undertaken instead; and Houghton, though his book was published here in 1938, wrote of what he had seen in 1935. So I have pieced together, from scattered articles and reports, from books and bulletins, and from what I know of the Russian Theatre, and the U.S.S.R. in general, a picture which I believe to be, though scrappy

and limited, at any rate accurate in detail and correct in perspective.<sup>1</sup>

It was in 1935 that I first became aware of the Soviet Theatre with a more awakened consciousness than that of an unsuccessful experimental producer in a highbrow repertory theatre. It was the audience that had roused me. I had come to see that the audience is one of the most important factors in a good theatre, and always has been down the ages—but of that I write elsewhere. I went to Russia in 1937 to see for myself what a real collective audience was like. And at first I was disappointed. It was not at all what my preconceptions had led me to expect. There were no slogans of world-revolution; no earth-shaking experiments in machine art. The slogans sounded like proverbs; and the red flag fluttered as naturally in the stage-breeze as the *mappa mundi* over the B.B.C. People were human, friendly, true on the stage as in the street.

Then one evening, in a Moscow hotel restaurant drinking cranberry *kvass* with Paul Robeson, I had my eyes cleared. As I listened to that great spirit describing the new angle taken by the Soviet Theatre, sketching the possibilities of the strange impact of western civilisation on remote, barbaric peoples, and opening up so wide and so human a vista, I began to see. As I walked back to bed with the dawn paling the sky over the floodlit red flag on the Kremlin, I began to understand. But even so, I did not then realise fully what was happening. Paul Robeson might have written this book then. It is only since I began putting together my notes that to me the implications have become clear. Not all of them, either. They are as boundless as human nature. But between the period written of by Norris Houghton and the temporary and partial interference of the Fascist invasion, there is a distinct phase of the Soviet Theatre which ought to be recorded; after the drawing up of the Stalin Constitution in 1936 there were plain a spiritual direction and a geographical broadening as directly attributable to the

<sup>1</sup> For war-time economy I have limited in the text all notes of authorities to direct quotations.

Second Five Year Plan as the (now for the time dislocated) Dniepropetrovsk dam; and I therefore take as my starting-point a date anywhere in 1937, when that plan had more than completed itself and minds were taut for greater conquests of science and effort.

But the curtain must not go up before I have expressed very heart-felt thanks to the following:

To Dr. G. M. Vevers, for permission to use material from several articles in, and blocks prepared for, *The Anglo-Soviet Journal*.

To the Society for Cultural Relations with the U.S.S.R., for permission to reproduce these and the other illustrations in this book, and for the use of its excellent library in Gower Street.

To Simon Boyanus, whose experience of the Russian stage has helped me as greatly as his genius for teaching the Russian language phonetically, even to one not lucky enough to be his pupil.

And to Kit, my wife, who first suggested this book and has since been the means of my making it.

## CHAPTER II

# The Shortcomings of the Old Theatre

ALL periods of vivid and interesting drama reflect a vivid and interesting collective life in the community; for the theatre is by nature a communal art and a communal function, and the outward forms of any given theatre<sup>1</sup> reflect the inner mind of the audience, just as the audience reflects the inner mind of the theatre.

In our own theatrical history it is exciting to trace the new mercantile-class audiences, the broader masses of the bourgeoisie, for whom as audience in the mid-eighteenth century Handel and Garrick created a new realism, a popular art, in place of the artificialities and limited stylishness of the Restoration and Queen Anne; and to follow thereafter the false classicism of the new rich asserting their nobility out of industrial crime in the statuesque Siddons and her stilted brother; and later still against that, the passionate lawlessness of the Luddites and the uneducated Edmund Kean. For it is the audience which makes the theatre; and therefore the stage cannot be remote from the social trends of the time, unless its audience is itself comfortably remote.

And so it was in Russia.

In the early days of the October Revolution, and for some time after, when there was an urgent military and/or

<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'theatre' in the sense of a unit for dramatic presentation which includes company, producer and stage staff, playwright and audience. A further indication lies in the remarks of a Russian critic, who, trying to inform his Russian readers of theatre life in London, wrote: "In London there are no theatres, only theatre buildings." There is also a saying in the Russian theatre-world that if a company has enough members qualified to play the various characters in Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, that company may be called a 'Theatre.' It should also be added that in the Soviet Union the word 'theatre' is used of all scenic performances including Ballet and Opera, the latter being as carefully 'produced' as are strictly 'dramatic' shows. But from inadequate knowledge and from considerations of space, I have had to limit the scope of this book to the purely 'dramatic' side of the stage, that is plays where music is only incidental or (rarely) absent.

economic need for all in the community to sink their individual claims and act as units of humanity, the rough-and-ready circus-like technique of the Proletcult Theatres and Smyshlayev's Mass Theatres helped to encourage and preserve that spirit of self-suppression. The 'bio-mechanically' trained acrobats of Meierhold's Theatre made people proud to be cogs in a machine-world that was to save them. The findings of Pavlov about the motives of human conduct, reflected in the removal of old taboos and a riot of so-called 'free' love, were glorified by Tairov's beautiful constructions at the point of abstract art, where, as in surrealism, scientific law and the personal dream meet. When necessity called for the NEP men, the audience called for satire. The great ones of the past were guyed, because they seemed to have no share in this brave and new, if perilous and strange, world. It was a makeshift masterpiece, this Revolutionary theatre—a riot of blood and aspiration, hate and love; as indeed it had to be, serving the passionate confusion of whole cities newly awake.

But no people, therefore no culture, therefore no theatre, can be formed of passion alone. Passion lapses; and soberer heads find problems on all sides. Therefore the people, and the culture, and the theatre, have to reason, as the people reasoned in the days of Aeschylus or Shakespeare or Seami; 'reason' being that which decides, after reflection, the best way to solve problems. Under wise leadership, the collective life goes forward. Now Stalin, a Georgian, had always been as aware as Lenin was of the immense multi-nationality of the Soviet peoples. Indeed it was largely through his tactful wording and prestige<sup>1</sup> in 1923 that the remoter peoples of the Tsarist empire ever became the Soviet peoples whose problem he had now to face. And what, eight or nine years later, did he see?

He saw a group of some 175 million people, living in at least twenty-seven cultures as different as Laplanders from Greeks and as Germans from Chinese, but all subscribing to

<sup>1</sup> He put the case concisely in a pamphlet called *Marxism and the National Question*, printed in 1913. See also Appendix II.

one common principle, having one collective outlook. Now we know from our own country, where there is nothing like so strong a collective outlook, how infectious the theatre is. British Drama League statistics show how rapidly all corners of a country can produce local dramatic enterprises when the mood is on them. Between 1921 and 1923 the members of this organisation increased sevenfold. Four years later the growth had become twenty-sevenfold, the industrial centres of the north being more quickly organised than the residential south.

All over the Soviet Union, where new horizons were opening and all life became interesting, as it had never been in the days of kicks and drudgery, there was a demand for the theatre scarcely paralleled in history for its wideness and intensity. Travelling companies dropped seeds that sprouted before their return next year. And yet the picture was unsatisfying.

The trouble was that the formalistic theatre contained in itself the machinery for its own destruction. By definition it eliminated the individual human life. And it was a newly stirred hope of this individual life, a reinvigorated pride in the man and the work and the world-to-be, which was calling people into the theatres. When the Revolutionary inhumanity subsided, and development of the individual became the aim of the new culture, this theatre could not cater for it, because it did not admit its existence. Audiences, finding nothing for their needs, fell away. Actors, finding that their craftsmanship was being sacrificed to the producer's theories without need, threw up their engagements or went elsewhere for training.

Already in 1937 it was plain that the huge new theatre which was being built for Meierhold would never be his. So plain, that I had to alter the script of a talk I broadcast the following April, because he lost his existing theatre, as I had forecast, between the acceptance of the script and the transmission. Nobody was surprised when Tairov was deposed from the directorship of the Moscow Kamerny Theatre, and a committee appointed, under which he served as producer.

For by the Stalin Constitution, and by the principles of Lenin and his colleagues before that, every citizen and every nationality is entitled to his own individuality and culture. And the theatre is part of that culture, an aid to that individuality. A sophisticated and cynical central theatre on the one hand, with a primitive and simple regional theatre on the other, is not Socialism, as it is understood in the Soviet Union. The policy of the Soviet Union is to give all citizens not only the development of their own selves and their own culture, but also the benefits of the long tradition of Western European culture, to which they belong by right of their entry into Western European history.

No use to burlesque Shakespeare or Racine because they have never read Marx. The audience wants to know now what these great spirits thought about life; and what the life was that they knew and thought about. No use turning men into machine-parts on the stage when in life they view the machine as a helper, not a god. The audience wants to know how others live, so that their own personal lives can be richer in the joy and gusto they are greedy for. No use pretending that all Tsars and Tsars' officials were evil men. On the contrary, many were victims of their own concern for the people; and the audience wants to see their stories on the stage, to keep a more critical eye on their own officials. Moreover, the majority of the audiences are simple country folk, and the sophistication of this urban 'advanced' theatre means nothing to them.

And so we come (for we can't avoid the word, and we may as well meet it now and have done) to Socialist Realism. For in the theatre what has been said in the last paragraph is really all that this much-abused and uncertain term connotes.

According to the Hungarian literary historian Georg Lukacs,<sup>1</sup> it was first used in 1932 at the time of the liquidation (largely for political reasons) of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). The formalist artist denies the value of the individual man. Therefore if he takes action,

<sup>1</sup> In an article on 'Socialist Realism,' in *International Literature*, 1939, World's Fair Issue, p. 87.

he takes the way of Fascism. For many years Fascist 'Fifth-Column' methods worked in other countries besides Spain, as we now admit; and the Soviet Union could scarcely hope to escape. Those who encourage Fascism would encourage it in Paradise, if they could. Of course not all the formalist artists were guilty; but all, in the isolated Soviet Union, were suspect. And even some who were above that reproach were not above the reproach that they were out of touch with the people, like Eisenstein. So "the distinction between economic activity and culture, which has become quite the vogue in the imperialist era . . . contradicts the facts and is objectively wrong in regard to every stage of historical development."<sup>1</sup> Lukacs goes on to explain that in non-socialist surroundings revolutions of form are sought incessantly to arrest the 'decline of literature.' So there develop at one and the same time naturalism (a photographic copying of superficial details) and the rebellious 'subjectivity' of expressionism, surrealism, etc., both claiming to be the true expression of the times.

Socialist Realism was not a new invention, but a correction of both these tendencies. As the journalist and art-critic Dmitri Kalm says,<sup>2</sup> it is not necessary to make rehearsals tortuous things by requiring the actors "to know what Hamlet did when he was ten years old or in what bank Yegor Bulychov kept his money." But on the other hand the formalist producer like Meierhold or Tairov deprived the actor of his individuality—made him an unthinking marionette.

So there was to be no place for the early naturalism of the Moscow Art Theatre, as when in the production of *Power of Darkness* (1902) dirt in the village street was copied on the set from a specimen brought from a place near Tula. But neither was a crowd to be brought on and drilled and moved about like a flock of sheep, however picturesquely. Make an end of the importance of outsides, and let the inner character

<sup>1</sup> Lukacs, in an article on 'Socialist Realism,' in *International Literature*, 1939, World's Fair Issue, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *International Literature*, 1939, No. 8-9, pp. 71-2.

express itself. Good sets don't necessarily mean good productions. Fruit doesn't necessarily ripen best in a good man's orchard; and to characterise a hero's house thus is bad designing. A proper producer trusts his audience. The attitude to the past, too, needed modifying. In 1935 Tairov produced a historical play with a musical score by Borodin called *The Ancient Warriors* in which he ridiculed the piety of older days, and thereby falsified their atmosphere. But this was not what his audience was wanting, nor was it consistent with the mental progress of his own time. His own progressiveness was unprogressive. Contrast with this the new production of Gutzkov's great Jewish play *Uriel Akosta* by Sudakov at the Maly Theatre in 1940. In this both he and the leading scene-designer of the Soviet Union, Rabinovich, were much praised for the truthful way in which they reproduced the atmosphere of a gathering in the synagogue, necessary for the explanation of the general theme of the play.

The playwright as well as the producer was appealed to. It was not to be his privilege, as so often happens, to drown his historical theme in archaeologically correct habits or period diction; nor, on the other hand, to preach. Ridicule in plenty awaits him if he does. But he was to keep a perspective, in plays of today as well as of yesterday. To quote Maxim Gorky on *Playwriting* (1933)—a man no one could call sentimental or effusive—he was to look at “the doings of the passing day from the height of those splendid aims which the working class have set themselves as the ancestors of the new mankind.”

In short, the theatre in all its branches was to bear in mind the position *sub specie humanae aeternitatis* of whatever events it was portraying, whether of the past, present, or future. But not all theatres immediately succeeded in doing so. Long after 1933, when the Committee for Art, which is responsible for organising the policy and place<sup>1</sup> of the arts in

<sup>1</sup> For economic reasons, among others. All finance being state-finance, the building and opening of new theatres, the closing of (rare) redundancies, the improving of facilities, naturally depend on the general cultural line of the community.

Soviet life, had announced the new attitude, we find the Maly Theatre still hewing the monumental statues it has carved for a hundred years. We find Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theatre stoutly asserting<sup>1</sup> that "the theatre does not intend to discontinue experimentation." Experimentation even in formalist directions, in case there is something Socialist Realism can learn there still.

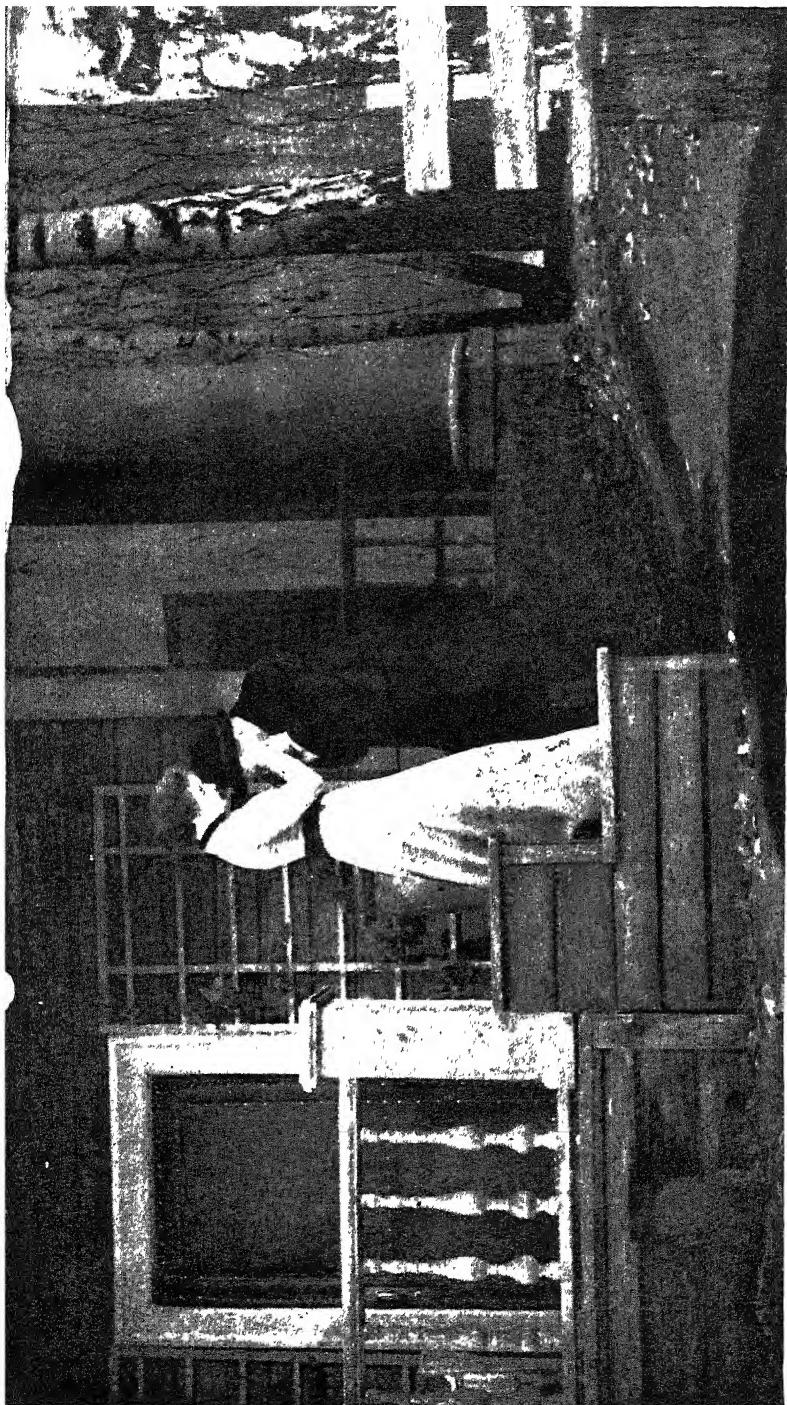
In fact we have a full account of that old war-horse's behaviour in 1938 when preparing a new production of *The Three Sisters* at the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>2</sup> The scene-designers, V. V. Dmitriev and I. Ya. Gremislavsky, prepared designs closely following the original set. To their surprise Nemirovich-Danchenko rejected them, announcing: "(1) We can't treat Chekhov as hitherto. (2) The original production was not faultless, and Stanislavsky himself would have given it a new start, even in pre-revolutionary days. (3) The actors' treatment must be different. (4) And it's quite plain that today we must cut right away from the old naturalistic tendencies in the décor." He wanted the whole of the Prozorovs' house to be visible; and the entire set had to be twirlable. He had also decided that the colour of the play was grey-green. No need for a ceiling-cloth—just an awning detached from the set. No need for walls—just flats and screens.

The artist's own account is amusing. "The set for Act One was a complete circle in front of which, on the bend, was a foreshortened house. In the Second Act Andrey's rooms were visible—sitting-room and bedroom. The Third Act began in the garden: night, a glow in the sky, tree-trunks. (Turn): a hall on the lower floor of the house where the refugees from the fire gather. (Turn): Andrey's room (playing violin). (Turn): The sisters' room."

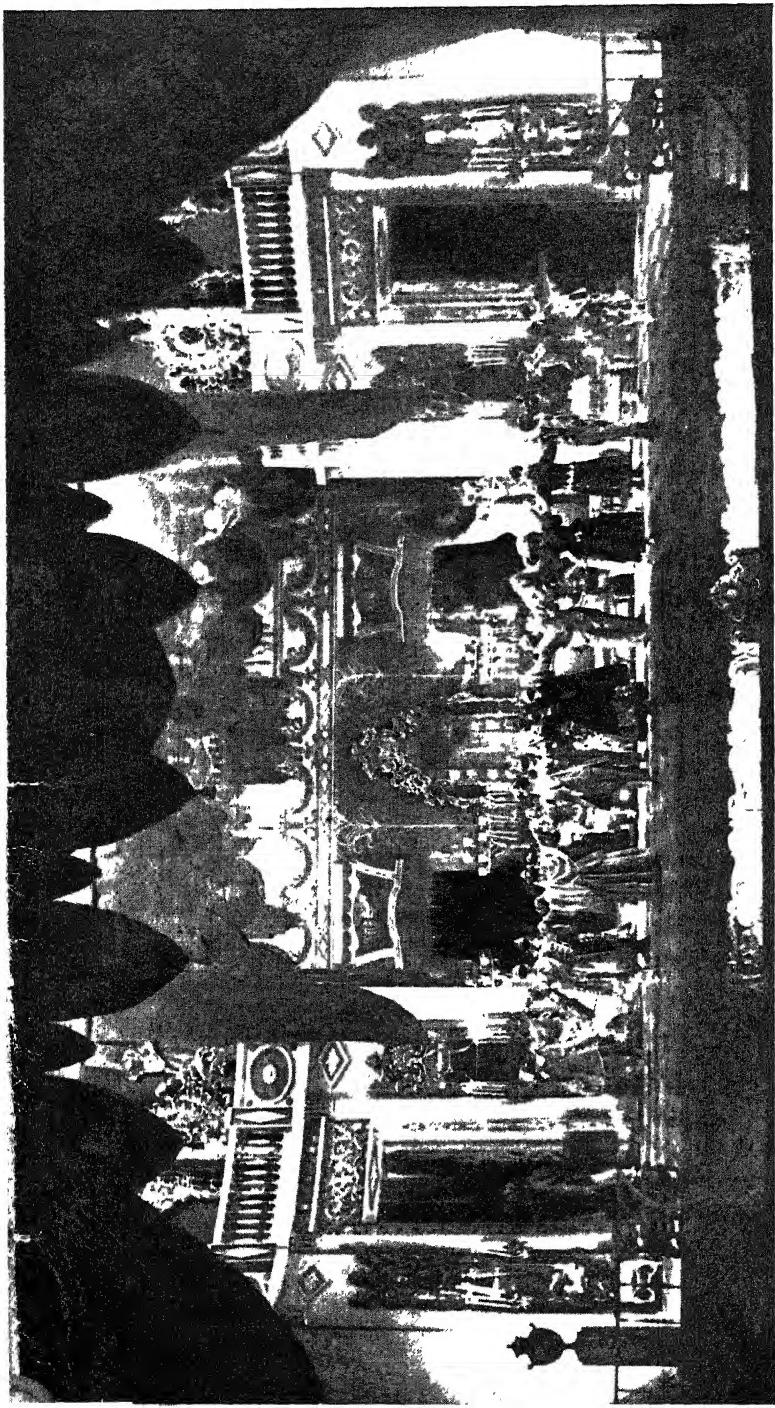
All these turns, says Gremislavsky, were frightful, and after a good many rehearsals Nemirovich-Danchenko decided to change it all again. Little by little the alterations made the

<sup>1</sup> Quoted *International Literature*, 1929, World's Fair Issue, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in an article on 'The Work of the Decorators in *The Three Sisters*', *Teatr*, 1940, No. 12, p. 140.



The 1940 production of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* at the Moscow Art Theatre. Scattered leaves point the decay of the sisters' lives, as Tuzenbach (Hmeley) bids Irina (Stepanova) good-bye before the duel.



Meierhold's new style. The masked ball in his third production of Lermontov's *Masquerade*, at the Pushkin Dramatic Theatre, Leningrad. Sophisticated mirrors glitter evilly throughout.

set revert to normal. The grey-green became clear grey. A ceiling was used. Tall windows were allowed to show the landscape. Walls appeared as walls. Then the windows shrank to a true size, as being in sympathy with Chekhov's meaning. Finally, the colours of the play became all the hues of the rainbow and bright at that.

Yet at the same time, the production was new. Chekhov developed from the theme of the one-intelligent-man-versus-the-stupid-mob (in his first play *Ivanov*),<sup>1</sup> through *The Seagull*, where the hero is slightly identified with the crowd (trivial majority to noble minority), through *Uncle Vanya*, where the need for a principle of living is shown, to *The Three Sisters*, where Chekhov finds full expression of his understanding of life and his own times.

Naturally the original production of the play could not have this perspective. Even Stanislavsky had not so wide a vision as Chekhov. The new production aims at giving the play "as if it were actually a new play never performed before."<sup>2</sup> The people are no longer dreaming of the future as something distant and hopeless. The separate dramas of Irina, Masha, Andrey, and Tuzenbach are dramas that took place in many lives before the Revolution. The stuffy provinciality in the furniture, the photographs of the military Prozorovs on the walls, the cluttering up of intelligence—these have gone. There are flowers everywhere in the rooms, but a minimum of bric-à-brac. Following Chekhov's stage direction, "Out of doors it is sunny, gay," the outlook is one of quietude and opening joy. The Fourth Wall Theory is abandoned, and the windows open not on the auditorium, but on a garden full of white flowers. The glimpses of the autumn countryside respond to the raptures of Vershinin and Tuzenbach about them. It is the lyricism of Chekhov that the new production seeks to express.

The 'Theatre Theatrical' still survives in the last three productions of the Mossovet Theatre (as the old MOSPS is now called): *The Liar* and *La Locandiera* by Goldoni, and an

<sup>1</sup> Article by A. Roskin, 'New Lines,' in *Teatr*, 1941, No. 2, pp. 21-41.

<sup>2</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko's own words.

old-fashioned play by Ostrovsky called *Poor Brides*. The first two are treated as if from the *Commedia dell' Arte*, the last as a comedy of types, on a theory of what was called 'austere realism,' but was in fact pure symbolism—a number of trades or categories walking about in costumes and cluttered up with properties, which are the pet weakness of this producer, Samvil Margolin. Cultured and honest though Margolin is, he missed the fact that Goldoni's greatness lies in his ability to create human beings out of the types that were on the Italian stage before he reformed it. And the audience, unable to recognise the persons as human, were not moved in the least by the carnival songs and capers and merry by-play.

In 1939 the Committee for Art, in conjunction with the All-Russian Theatrical Society (an institution for research and the encouragement of creative work in the theatre, uniting actors and producers), called a conference representing all the 2,000 producers in the Union, which lasted a week. It was notable for the stand taken by the veteran Jewish actor Mikhoels. He thought too much emphasis was being laid on the rational, and not enough play being given to the imagination. It is the imagery that unites actors and producers, so that neither encroaches too much on the other. He might have added that it is imagery which unites the stage with the audience, and the theatre with the soul of the people.

In this stand against the 'schematised' or dictated theatre he was joined by two of the big producers of the new Soviet Theatre, Radlov and Popov. Popov said: "To give a theatre its own creative individuality . . . the stage director must know how to learn from the community with which he is working, to listen to the collective and trust its taste more. The producer must know how to liberate and utilise the actor's creative imagination." Daring and originality were not a matter of thinking out tricks, but came from studying the world, the outlook of people, the ideas we have. After a free discussion in which many other and often opposing ideas were argued, it was agreed that the theatre ought to be

careful not to lapse into a stereotyped or schematic art, but should make every effort to keep the imaginative side upward.

These examples are given here to help in showing what Socialist Realism is or is not. It will be examined in detail in the pages that follow. It is a Realism aware that the truth of life and the truth of art may be phrased differently, and a Socialism of which Kalinin said at a meeting of artists in Moscow in January 1939: "The Socialist-Realist should portray the existing socialist reality, but his work should at the same time stimulate the development of thought and the growth of men's noble aspirations." It is no new thing. Mayakovsky was a Socialist Realist when, in a rhapsody of joy that was not personal greed, nor mere animal pleasure, but a song of triumph summing up the victory of the Revolution, he wrote:

" Of those fresh cheeses  
gleaming there  
edible amber  
rich and rare  
now my ruble  
brings me  
more! "

It was what Lunacharsky looked forward to as long ago as 1925.<sup>1</sup> "In fact, here and there, there has been a sickness which we have to outgrow. As stated above, classical Realism is the most suitable form for the new theatre to take, but this suitable form must be infused with new content. This has come slowly, partly through the fault of the theatres themselves. In our left-wing theatres there have been many genuine revolutionaries, but they have had gradually to free themselves of their tricks (*фокусничанье*) and come round to a classical Realism, though one modified for the technical achievements and more energetic tempo of contemporary life:" And later he drew a picture of the Revolution,<sup>2</sup> calling on the theatre "in the capacity of an assistant, a searchlight, and a counsellor. I want to see

<sup>1</sup> An article in *Комсомольская Правда* 12. viii. 1925.

<sup>2</sup> From *Yubiley*—a collection of Jubilee speeches and articles, 1933, to be found in Lunacharsky's статьи о театре и драматургии (Moscow, 1938).

both my friends and foes on the stage. I want to see them in the present, past, and future, in their development and evolution. I want to study them through your medium. . . . Through you I want to love and to hate, not more passionately, for I am passionate as it is, but with greater clarity. I want you to glorify my exploits and my fallen heroes. I want you to reveal my mistakes, my short-comings, and my scars, and to do this truthfully; for I do not fear them."

No definition of Socialist Realism could better that as a description of the wishes of the new theatre. But there is one important aspect that it does not cover: the audience.

"A new actuality," it was said of Literature in the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, "has bred and is bearing new emotions, new feelings, a new ethic, new relationships of people to one another, new social laws governing people's psychology, a new logic, a new ideology. By a mere transference of the old literary styles you'll never do anything. The old precepts stand in need of a new interpretation of them, of a new approach, and sometimes even of a replacement of them by new ones."<sup>1</sup> This is doubly true of the theatre, where people living in that new actuality are helping to create the performance.

And again: "Socialist Realism does not boil down to an art-creation in style. Style is a secondary phenomenon, a particular moment of Socialist Realism. In Socialist Realism as a method an endless quantity of styles, idioms, forms, modes, and so on, is permissible on principle."<sup>2</sup> And this also is doubly true of the theatre.

This first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers—the new Writers' Union, set up in April 1932 by decision of the Communist Party, and reaching a membership of 4,000 in its first year—adopted a credo which includes the following striking definition of Socialist Realism:

"Socialist Realism, in making its appearance as the basic method of Soviet letters and literary criticism, demands of the artist a truthful and historically concrete representation

<sup>1</sup> П. Юдин. *Об уставе союза советских писателей* (Moscow, 1934), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

of actuality in its revolutionary development. Besides that, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artist's representation of actuality must be combined with the problem of remaking to the ideal (с задачей идеальной переделки) and educating the workers in the spirit of Socialism.”<sup>1</sup>

It will be seen that here are two sides: the representation must not be untrue, either to present-day fact or to the facts of the past; but it must express that truth in such terms that the worker-audience of today gets a perspective of either the Socialism it is helping to build or of the factors of the past out of which that Socialism has come.

This is true of all the arts in the Soviet Union; but it is vital to the theatre. Socialist Realism in the theatre is only possible with a Socialist audience. There is nothing in the Russian Theatre like that ‘realism’ of middle-class theatres elsewhere, of which L. A. G. Strong has written a pungent early quatrain:

In this theatre they has plays  
on us, and high-up people comes  
and pays to see things playing here  
they'd scut and run from in the slums.<sup>2</sup>

That theatre was the Abbey, Dublin. And such was the Abbey’s ‘realistic’ audience. But Soviet audiences are not like that. Every theatre must adapt itself to its particular audience and the new Soviet Theatre has many scores of audiences, all keen, all theatre-minded—but all different.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, Устав и т. д., p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Dublin Days* (Oxford, 1921).

### CHAPTER III

## The Audience beyond the Caucasus

In 1937 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a federation of eleven countries, much more diverse in their cultures and degrees of development than, for example, the countries of South America, most of which have approximated and merged into a reflection of their Spanish or Portuguese conquerors' way of living. A deep sociological or geographical survey is not possible here; but an excellent account is given in N. Mikhailov's *Soviet Geography* (London, 2nd Edition, 1937).

Of these eleven countries (more have joined since then; see Chapter VII), by far the largest and most populous is itself a federation of smaller countries, the original Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, which sweeps across from Central Europe to the Pacific and rises on the map from almost the latitude of Peiping to islands more northerly than Spitzbergen. Within this 'Russian' framework are autonomous republics, diverse as the Tatar, the Kalmyk, the Karelian, and Buryat-Mongolia, while the whole R.S.F.S.R. is subdivided into twenty-four provinces (e.g. West Siberian Province, Kalinin Province, Northern, Far East, etc.), some of which contain autonomous regions with a culture and organisation of their own.

With a few western exceptions, the other eleven countries fall into two groups: the Transcaucasian group—a group in geography only—of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, which fill the land south of the Caucasus between the Black and the Caspian Seas; and the group which in the days when the conquered natives were ruled by Tsarist military Governor-Generals used to be called Russian Turkestan—the Kirghiz, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmenian S.S. Republics. These are widely different, as they have been for centuries, in speech, culture, religion, and even civilisation.

But the Tsarist régime cleverly divided them into arbitrary units of administration (known as the 'prison network') which rendered them incapable of national pride and therefore of national action. In the main, British Empire methods can be said to be slightly more liberal. In 1937 some of these nations, like some of the small autonomous units inside the big federation, had a fine history behind them and a developed culture; others were little better than what we imply in our word 'natives.' But each, under the Stalin Constitution and the cultural aim of the U.S.S.R. since its foundation, was now entitled to the joint benefits of its own and Western tradition.

I propose to deal with the impact of the Socialist Realist Theatre on these communities in the following order: I, The Transcaucasian group. II, The Central Asia group. III, The even more backward communities. After a glance at certain special audiences throughout the Union as a kind of girdle binding them in, we will then turn to the Western nationalities, which have been more developed, and lead up to the Central Theatres of Moscow and Leningrad, and the new men who have come to the fore in them.

## I. TRANSCAUCASIA

### i. Armenia

If a twentieth-century Noah were to land his flying ark on either of the twin summits of Mount Ararat, and looked south-west, he would survey the primitive hopelessness of the Turkish highlands, pastoral nomadic figures with sheep and goats, dirt and squalor, tents and disease; the tattered ends of a way of life scarcely altered since Biblical times, neglected, harsh, and sub-human. Scarcely different would be the land to the south-east, though this area belongs to Persia. Here too he would meet the age-long herdsman with his Mohammedan attitude to women, his disrespect for others' lives, his enforced habit of conservative satisfaction with the bare bones of existence. But if our Noah turned and marched north, very different would be the scene; for here across the

river frontier is Soviet Armenia. At his feet lies a modern city, with up-to-date traffic, a city reconstructed on a beautiful, almost circular plan, Yerivan, the capital. A small town in the eighth century B.C., it was captured by Turks and Persians alternately in the Middle Ages, and by the Tsarist armies in 1827. In 1937 Lenin's electrification scheme was in full progress, and power from the huge stations on Lake Sevan make life lighter and easier. There are tall, modern ferro-concrete buildings, a University village, museums of all kinds, and scientific institutions. The railway station sends off the products of the high plateaus and rich valleys: copper, wool, and leather from the former and tufa and pumice for the building trade; from the latter, fruits and wine and a brandy that is almost proverbial.

Perhaps the finest building is a circular one, which looks as if the Armenian architect Tamanyan had adapted the Roman Amphitheatre at Verona into the constructionist principles he had schooled himself in. This is the State Opera and Ballet Theatre of Armenia, founded in 1921 after the country had joined the Soviet Union. The new building (1939) is a double theatre, with two stages back to back, one auditorium being used in summer (seating 2,000), the other, slightly smaller, in the winter months; or they can be joined together, making a big circular theatre with a round stage in the centre. Architecturally, it is ingenious.

The Armenian language is a mixture of Aryan and Japhetic (= 'Chaldean').<sup>1</sup> Armenian literature is ancient. There was a Prince Artavazda II who wrote Greek plays in the first century B.C. There was an eminent writer named Gabriel Sundukyan who wrote plays in the nineteenth century A.D., and after whom the State Theatre at Yerivan is now named.<sup>2</sup> There were poets, like Tumanyan, who wrote the great epic of peasant life *The Taking of Imkabert*. There were musicians,

<sup>1</sup> The T.S.F.S.R. Handbook published in Moscow, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> It is the custom in the U.S.S.R. to name theatres and other institutions after great men of the past, recent or remote. Thus the Moscow Art Theatre is the 'Gorky Moscow Art Academic Theatre'; the former Alexandrinsky Theatre at Leningrad is called the 'Pushkin,' etc. It is a socialist modification of the custom by which we call our theatres after unidentified royal persons, and our Halls after Roman or Greek buildings—'Queen's Theatre,' 'Palladium.'

like Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil Alexander Spendiarov, who died in 1928, turning national folk idiom into opera; and Tigranyen, whose opera *Anush* was written before any opera-house existed in the country. Amateurs performed it in halls, and songs from it were sung by the whole people, thirty years ago.

So there had always been an Armenian culture, though the Tatar invasions in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries broke up all its urban life, and though the Tsarist government frowned on and suppressed it to such an extent that there was no theatre building in Armenia in 1913. Now there are twenty-four, which contain in their repertories not only native Armenian works but translations of Russian and other foreign classics. In 1938, for instance, Schiller's *Intrigue and Love* was given in Armenian at the State Theatre at Yerivan, which has since then produced *Othello*. In 1939 the Sundukyan Theatre at Yerivan was preparing Pogodin's *The Man with the Gun* (see p. 174).

The most prominent of the living Armenian playwrights is Deremik Demirchyan, whose most recent play, *Native Land*, opened the Yerivan twentieth theatre season in 1940. This play is considered a fine example of his stage-craft and passionate writing. It depicts a historical episode in the tenth century. The Armenian ruler and patriot Gagik has not come of age when his father dies; and one of the three regents, Prince Vest Sarkis, tries to seize the throne for himself. The Byzantine Greeks are preparing a campaign against the old royal centre Ani; and the citizens decide to build fortifications by their own initiative and labour. Vest Sarkis fears their enthusiasm. He issues a decree forbidding the fortification and imprisons the leaders. Removing also the courtiers who favour the rightful heir, he is on the point of taking the throne, when trumpets are heard, and Gagik appears to defend his rights. Young though he is, and having only a small force, he nevertheless routs the pretender. Once in power he reveals a rather too kindly nature, seems to trust the people and his enemies too far. Such at least is the opinion of his mother and his friends. But he is convinced

that if he keeps Vest Sarkis alive, the pretender's sympathisers, of whom he suspects there are many, will give themselves away.

The dangerous plan succeeds. He learns that the Catholics are planning to surrender the town to the Byzantine Emperor, in that curious alloy of religious faith and self-advancement which has caused so many wars. So he deprives them of their order, and raises an army of patriots. Surreptitiously the Catholics try various methods of 'sabotaging' the fortifications, while various court officials avail themselves, in what we now call Fifth Column activity, of various princes' reluctance to send their own feudal soldiery into the royal army.

In an exciting scene, said to be founded like the whole play on the facts of history, an armed mob headed by the churchmen bursts into the palace yard. The young Gagik comes forward alone to meet them, and such is his personal power that they fall back and allow him to address them. Using the timely arrival of a messenger from the Byzantine Emperor with a peremptory demand for surrender, he pulls the people together and rouses their will to resist. It is the story of Richard II, with this difference, that Gagik really had the people's welfare at heart actively, not passively; and that they were not subsequently betrayed.

The ensuing battle is watched by Gagik's mother and his wife—a poignant scene, since Gagik's wife is also Vest's sister; but the battle goes in Gagik's favour, and he and the Armenian people have preserved themselves from oppression.

The general atmosphere is like one of the Shakespeare historical plays; with a skilful stage-craft and subtle characterisation well conveyed, it is said, by the producer Vartan Adzemyan, and by the leading actor Vagarshyan, who added by the part of Gagik to the reputation he had gained as Yegor Bulychev, Lenin, and other characters from the Russian theatre.

As in other regional theatres, the Yerivan directors keep in touch with theatrical events in the rest of the Union. Thus in 1939 a production of *Masquerade* marked the 125th

anniversary of the birth of the great Russian romantic poet Lermontov. We shall be dealing with this aspect of regional theatrical life later.

So highly is the Armenian Theatre held in Russia, that it was invited to give performances during a Festival of Armenian Art in Moscow, in 1939, and has been awarded several of the highest honours.

A strange place to find as you wander down the northern slopes of Mount Ararat; and an even more wonderful revelation for the farmer or cattle-keeper, leaving the haunts of wolf and hyena, and learning in such ways the meaning of the ruined chapels and stone crosses which dot his countryside, the stone-carvings, the ancient bridges, and an illuminated manuscript fossilised in a cave, which connect him with nameable ancestors far back into his Chaldean past. Silk-workers under mulberry trees, canning and sugar-factory workers meditating in Oriental parks, have seen with their own eyes Gagik and Lenin in buildings built with their own hands.

## 2. *Azerbaijan*

Not all, in fact about 85 per cent., of the inhabitants of Armenia are Armenian; but there are many of that nation in the neighbouring country of Azerbaijan, which separates it from the Caspian Sea. The name Azerbaijan in Ancient Persian meant 'Land of Fire'—perhaps because of the eternally burning gases in the Apsheron peninsula, that juts out into the Caspian. In the Temple of the Fire Worshippers at Surakhan on this peninsula until the eighteen-seventies, stark naked hermits lived in cells to tend and adore the spouts and pipes, as in one form or another men have done since Zoroastrian times. For century by century empires have risen and fallen over Azerbaijan, and her history, though a jumble of vague stones, is ancient. She lay on the trade route from China and India to the West, and tribes and emperors alike fought for the possession of her: Scythians, the Iranian Akhmenids, Alexander's successors the Seleucids, Pompey heading the Romans, Sassanids and Arabs,

each held her for a time and added something to her outlook and monuments. But the prevailing influence was that of the Turks, who as bulk of the Mongol armies occupied and colonised Azerbaijan in the thirteenth century. The Turks gave the people their prevalent language, faith, and customs. From time to time Persian conquerors ousted them and introduced such industries as silk, but when the Tsars annexed part of it in the early years of the eighteenth century, and the whole of it in the nineteenth, Azerbaijan was primarily a Turkish country. In 1917 it was cleft with civil war through the actions of local chauvinists and religious leaders—dissensions only exacerbated by the British occupation in 1919–20. But Turkish, primarily, it was when the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan was set up in April 1920, and Turkish in character, primarily, it remains.

Three-fifths of its inhabitants speak a Turkish dialect; 10 per cent. are Armenian; and the rest are Georgians, Kurds, Russians, and two Iranian nationalities called Tats and Talyshes. They live in a land not unlike Egypt. Under a sultry sun the irrigated lowlands grow cotton. In these dry areas also the manipulations of man make rice grow, and with lowlier aid, silk. But in the mountain valleys of the south, where rain falls heavily, there are groves of oranges and lemons, and tangerines, and plantations of tea. For centuries there were nomads also in the land, and these still live a semi-nomadic life, grazing cattle in the mountains during the summer and driving them down to the lowlands for the winter. More modern nomads traverse the great forests, cutting maple and box, chestnut-oak and other timber trees, or the hard ironwood, nearest to metal of all vegetable products. In the jungles of the lowlands there are tigers, panthers, leopards, and the original wild zebu, which is tamed for domestic work. Hunting is in the blood of the natives, as it is in the Scottish Highlanders.

But the chief wealth of Azerbaijan is under the surface. Oil has been extracted at Baku for sixty years; yet in Tsarist days everything for the purpose except the native labour was brought to Baku, pipes, lime, money; and all the oil was taken

away. Eighty-three per cent. of Russia's oil came from here, but the native got no benefit. The oil, and the profits, went back to Moscow; he lived in a dirty hut.

Baku now extracts three times as much oil as it did then; but its percentage is much less than 83, and increasing quantities are used in the neighbourhood. A large industry has sprung up, making Baku the third largest city in the Soviet Union. Chemical plants, cement works, cotton mills and silk mills, factories where Caspian sturgeon and pilchard are canned and the famous caviare is prepared, tanneries, brick kilns, quarries, soap works, rice mills, repair shops, the terminus of an electric railway—this quiet, forgotten corner of Europe has come into its heritage. It is wealthy, progressive, clean. And with its new wealth come the amenities of civilisation (do not think it looks like Manchester): education, physical care of maternity, books, dentistry, research. The handicraft workers of the ancient Azerbaijan rugs learn all they can of aniline dyes and scientific methods, and then go back to their traditional craft with an added skill, improving the range of their dyes without impairing their quality. The itch to compare cannot here be resisted. We think of the Western Isles of Scotland.

Except for some uncertain ruins, and burial-places where curious stylised statues of rams or horses seem to be cropping the graves, the art of Azerbaijan was chiefly Islamic. Under Islam, theatrical shows were rare. But now the Baku theatre is one of the best in Eastern Europe. The Turkish women have laid aside the veil and train as actresses. (A similar laying aside like the adoption of a western alphabet in Kemalist Turkey was due to the example of Azerbaijan.)

For a thousand years the Azerbaijan people have had national poets. In the eighteenth century their Byron, Vagif, struggled to rouse and lead the people in resistance to Persian invasion. In the early nineteenth century a mighty figure appeared, Ilya Elvin Akhundov, the Molière of the Caucasus. He was poet, playwright, and philosopher. His poem on the death of Pushkin was the first acknowledgment of Pushkin's greatness by an Oriental writer. He became

translator to the chief civil administrator of the Caucasus, and saw from the inside the shortcomings of the Tsarist civil service which he brilliantly, daringly exposed in 1882 in his comedy *The Vizier of the Serabian Khandate*. In 1886 another comedy, *Molla-Ibrachim Khalil, Alchemist and Possessor of the Philosopher's Stone*, satirised the charlatans, dervishes, mullahs, who kept the people ignorant and exploited their superstitions. In all his work he defended and encouraged the enslaved women of the East, fought for the abolition of Arabic characters in favour of the Latin—a reform opposed as dangerous to Islam.

A great figure—yet he searched for fifteen years to find a publisher willing to undertake his chief philosophical work, which was thought atheistic and materialist. His plays, frowned upon by the Tsar, are now the proud experience of the Azerbaijan audiences, and of these there are many. In Baku alone there are several theatres—the chief being the Azizbekov State Theatre; there are separate Turkish and Armenian Theatres, a Peasants' Theatre, a Russian Workers' Theatre, in each of which such plays are given as will appeal to each type of audience.

But this does not mean that the Turkish Theatre gives only Azerbaijan plays, nor the Peasants' Theatre only simple stories. On the contrary, the classics of various ages and lands may be found in any of these, or the latest production of a Moscow or Ukrainian dramatist. In 1938, for example, the State Dramatic Theatre produced *Macbeth*. It was a beautiful architectural set, with a bent arcade of round-headed arches and circular lights in the spandrels, all of which seemed cut out of cement or plastics. The costumes were from some barbarous feudal age of the East.

The Azerbaijan audience likes plays in verse. Their contemporary poet Samed Vurgun has written one in 'lofty, epigrammatic verse' about the life of Vagif. He has written other historical works for the stage, including a dramatic reconstruction of Stalin as an organiser in Baku. Another contemporary playwright is Jafar Jabarly, whose play *The Bride of Fire* deals with the friendship between the peoples in

the Union, with the socialising of the countryside, and with the change of heart among the leaders of thought in the regions, which has made both possible.

### 3. Georgia

The Georgian nation is quite as ancient as the Azerbaijan, and for the same reason: its territory lay on the same route. But lying on the west flank of the Caucasus, and having ports on the Black Sea, it came more directly under the influence of cultures familiar to our own tradition.

‘Georgia’ is a word from the Persians and Arabs. The people speak a language called Karthvelian, and name their own country after that. Into that language were translated not only the classics of the Persian conquerors, but even the *Aeneid* and Homer as early as the twelfth century. Byzantines, Mongols, Turks, and, from the eighteenth century, Russians, have all left their mark. The script used is wriggly—as if a hand accustomed to Arabic had learnt tremblingly to copy detached Russian or Hebrew characters.

This beautiful, luxuriant country was intensively russified (for the benefit of the Russians) throughout the nineteenth century. One symptom of the present de-russification is the change in the name of the capital, Tiflis, back to the Karthvelian form Tbilisi (which means ‘warm’)—a change our journalists and geographers have not so far recognised. The end of the Tsarist empire in 1917 was used by the Menshevik party, in league with White Guard officers and the British armies, which took over from the German Army of Occupation in 1918, to dash the rising hopes of the peasants and workers. A soviet government was established after a bitter struggle in 1921, but as late as 1924 there was an attempt by the nobles from abroad to stage a come-back. Only with the defeat of this was an ordered prosperity and national development possible.

But since then, development has been rapid and thorough. In the Rion Valley, “the most fertile district in the U.S.S.R.”<sup>1</sup> where before the Revolution little more than

<sup>1</sup> Mikhailov, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

maize was grown, now oranges, lemons, tangerines, tea, ramee,<sup>1</sup> and bamboo flourish. The finest wines in the Union are produced in other Georgian districts. The Caucasian grey bee is among the best in the world. The leaf of Abkhazia is the chief product of the U.S.S.R. Turkish tobacco industry. Cotton flourishes. The famous Georgian military highroad speeds through dizzying gorges on its graded way.

But some parts of the country have a climate not unlike Britain; and here fruits of more familiar kinds are rich and abundant, with deciduous trees like oak and elm, birch, beech and rowan,<sup>2</sup> and evergreens like pine and yew. In other, more remote places, you will see panthers through jungle lianas and brown bears on the cold rocky mountain-sides. Or you will meet miners coming from coal-pits and manganese mines, engineers from oil-fields and hydro-electric stations, chemists from factories, silk-workers from mills. Georgia is a little world in itself, and has a prosperity all of its own. The Georgians are only two-thirds of its population; for here again there is 10 per cent. of Armenians, several of whose most famous national writers are buried in a Tbilisi cemetery, and the rest are local autonomous nationalities (from Abkharia, Adjaria, Ossetia), and Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, and Jews. But all are united in pride that it is their country which gave Stalin to the twentieth century.

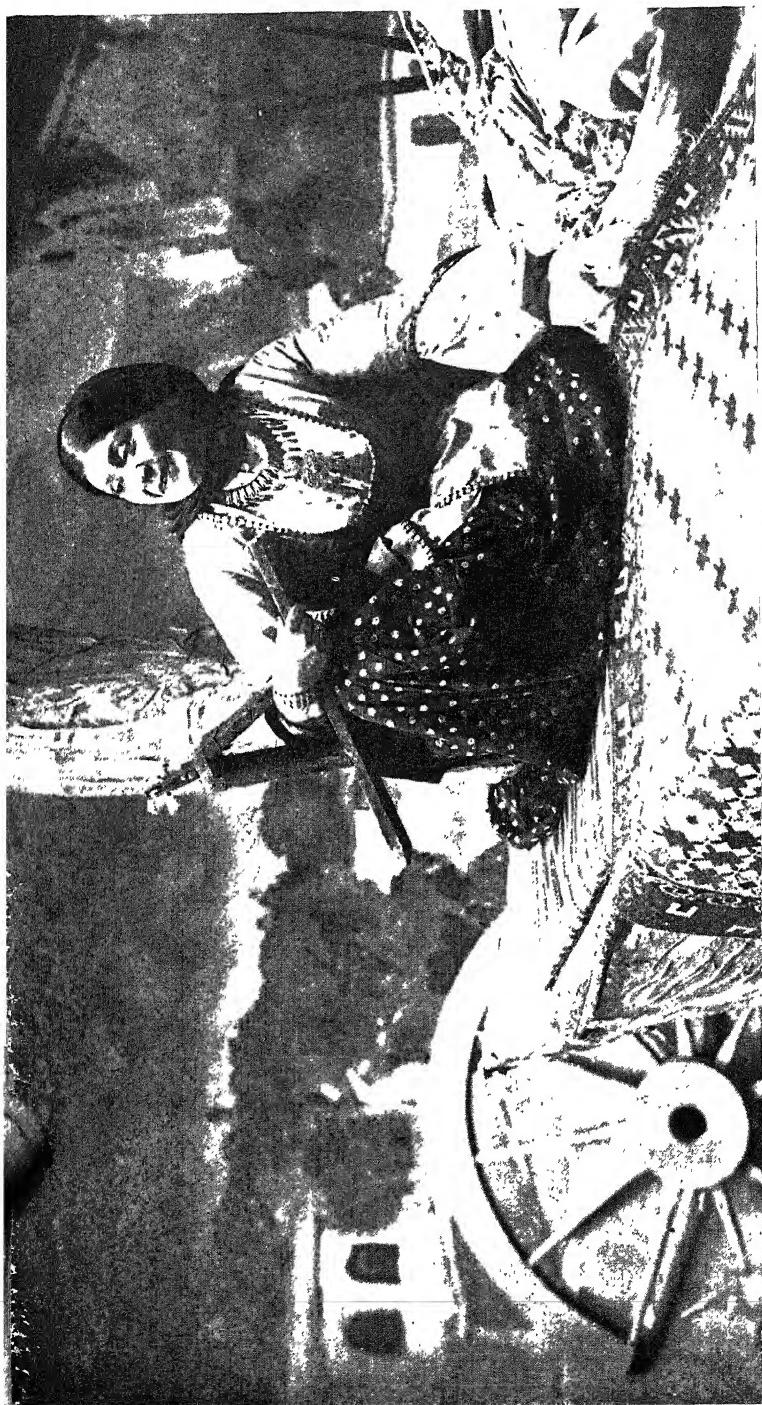
Some sixty years ago the first Georgian Theatre was founded by the literary men Ilya Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli at Kutaisi, in the Rion Valley, the land of the Golden Fleece, where Jason's grotto is still to be seen. But this produced little except light meaningless comedies, to be enjoyed by the Georgian intelligentsia and their Russian business friends. These two men were intelligent and wrote poems inspired by a love of freedom and the people, which were heard by a youth called Shalva Dadiani in the eighties and nineties. His father was a prominent local figure, but

<sup>1</sup> A Chinese nettle from which fibre is obtained.

<sup>2</sup> A Soviet botanist invents new fruits by crossing the rowan with other trees.



An example of Armenian production. In 1913 Armenia had no theatres.  
Now it has twenty-four.



Azerbaijan's leading actress Aziza Khanum in the first act of *Master Jordan and the Dervish*, a comedy by Akhundov,  
"the Molière of Azerbaijan."

Dadiani threw over his easy life, joined a group of strolling players, and left home. He went to the theatre at Kutaisi, then directed by Meshki, a producer of French comedies and an ambitious local climber. Encouraged by the action of a Georgian actor called Meshkishvili, who had become well known in the Moscow theatre world, and fought at the barricades in 1905, Dadiani turned his professional skill to practical use. He founded a little company to perform his own plays in workers' clubs. This was the first travelling theatre in Georgia. It was widely popular, even outside Georgian territory, especially at Novorossisk away toward the Kerch Peninsula, where stevedores and sailors found in it a theatre that spoke of the real things they knew. His play *In the Cavern* brought authentic Georgian miners upon the stage for the first time. His drama *Gegochkori* pleased because it showed a young scholar, a revolutionary, imprisoned by a tyrant prince in an underground cell. *When They Feasted* and *The Beginning* dealt with the class war; but his most famous work is *Those of Yesterday*, a satire on feudal Georgia. In 1930 he turned his merciless pen on the bureaucrats and chatterboxes of Soviet Russia and exposed self-seekers and climbers in *At the Very Heart*. This was produced in Moscow at the Theatre Olympiad. When Mchedelov, the Director of the Georgian Theatre Studio<sup>1</sup> in Moscow, died, Dadiani took his place, but later returned to Georgia and wrote more plays: *Tetnuld*, a tragedy of the struggle between the old world and the new; *Guria Ninoshvili* (stories from this writer's works), and *From the Spark*, a reconstruction of the early days of the Bolshevik Party and Stalin's work for it.

The Kutaisi theatre lasted beyond 1918; and in Tsarist days there was at Tbilisi a theatre called 'The People's House.' The gentry looked down on it, but it had a fairly high standard, being the training-ground of the sculptor-painter-caricaturist Mikhail Chiaureli, later to be one of the

<sup>1</sup> Most of the nationalities are in touch with theatrical training-centres in Moscow or Leningrad, where they can learn all that 'Western' theatre methods have to offer, before returning to solve their own problems.

great names in Soviet films. Apart from these, Georgia then had no theatre; now she has forty-eight.

One of the outstanding producers of the Georgian Theatre, indeed in the whole Union, is K. A. Marjanishveli. His theatre began in Kutaisi, but he moved it, company and all, to Tbilisi in 1930; and the present Kutaisi theatre is being run by some young actors who founded it in 1937 under the lead of Dodo Antadze, a pupil of Marjanishveli. They have a very full repertory of Georgian plays already. Apart from Dadiani and Tsereteli, there are sociological themes like *Their Cause* (how the intelligentsia joined the Revolution) and *Collective Farm Wedding* (a comedy); historical themes like *Georgi Saakadze* (the life of a remarkable Georgian statesman of the seventeenth century), and plays of the recent past like *The Count's Widow*, in which a Polish landlord, a French colonel, and a British general figure in a frontier incident in the Western Ukraine. Here the foreigners, curiously enough, are drawn in the round, but the peasants remain an undistinguishable mass.

Young though this company was, in 1940 it had produced *Othello* and was rehearsing *King Lear* without any false modesty or fear of an unfavourable contrast with the Maly Theatre or the Moscow State Jewish.

In Tbilisi there are two important theatres, Marjanishveli's, and the one named after the twelfth-century Georgian classical poet Rust'aveli. Marjanishveli's style is powerful, monumental; Vasadze at the Rust'aveli pays more attention to harmoniousness and polish. The former's *Othello* in 1938 was much helped by the genius of his scenic artist I. Gamrekeli, whose scene in the Piazzetta di San Marco is worthy of Rabinovich himself.

In 1939 the Rust'aveli Theatre made theatrical history by giving the first production in Georgian of a Russian play: Ostrovsky's *Guilty though Guiltless*. Marjanishveli countered with Gutskov's classic *Uriel Akosta* and the *Marriage of Figaro* by Beaumarchais; whereupon Vasadze went further by producing a play by an author of another non-Russian Soviet nation: *Bogdan Hmelnitzky*, by the young Ukrainian play-

wright Korneichuk. Although this describes the struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom against Polish landlords in the seventeenth century, it reminds the Georgian audience of their own feudal suffering; and thus unites two widely different peoples in a common pride and possessiveness.

But the minorities are not forgotten. The Rust'aveli Theatre plays also in Armenian and Turkish. There is the Plehanov Theatre in a suburb of Tbilisi which acts in Russian as well as Georgian, as does the State Opera House.

In Georgia we have seen people who were working out their own theatrical salvation even before the Revolution. Let us now turn to a much more backward district, and see what has happened in Central Asia since the coming of Bolshevism.

## CHAPTER IV

# “In the Steppes of Central Asia”

### i. *Uzbekistan*

ON the east coast of the Caspian Sea, and barred from it only by a thin line of land that is broken by the narrow ‘Black Gullet,’ a sheet of water lies, as big again as Zuyder Zee. For some five hundred miles east of this stretches the Kara-Kum Desert, the ‘Black Sands,’ unusable by man for centuries. This is the western part of the old Tsarist province of Turkestan, which ran across to China and south to Afghanistan.

The new Soviet organisation has split this old province into five independent republics—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikstan and Kirghizia and Kazakhstan, corresponding to the widely different peoples in each. All are strict Moslems, until quite recently keeping their women veiled and in separate rooms. As the American woman traveller Anna Louise Strong writes:<sup>1</sup> “In the vast hinterland beyond the railways of the Russian settlers live a variety of native peoples, deposited by successive wars of invasion, speaking different languages, with cultures of their own, which, devoid of sanitation or general literacy, yet produced irrigation, cotton growing, famous vineyards, fine weaving and embroidery, rug making, architecture of some magnificence, and many kindred arts.<sup>2</sup> All are Mohammedans with the usual social system of the Moslems: women veiled and keeping to the women’s quarters, court procedure based on the Koran interpreted by mullahs, schools devoted to reciting the Moslem scriptures.” The richest and most industrialised is Uzbekistan.

The Uzbeks are a settled people, skilful in irrigation. The

<sup>1</sup> *Red Star in Samarkand* (London, 1930), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that where handicraft standards are high and literacy low, a high degree of civilisation has often been at some previous period suppressed, and lives on in the folk-mind, half-articulate.

old Tsars used to boast that Samarkand was the brightest jewel in their crown; but the importance of Samarkand has dwindled, and Tashkent has taken its place. An Uzbek citizen once described to me the strange contradictions of the journey to this city. After miles and miles of desert, suddenly irrigated areas are reached. There are high-wheeled carts on roads, horses, oxen, and camels. In watered orchards there are trees, melons, grapes, and vegetables; and rows of low plants in cotton-fields, with dark-skinned people, Mongoloid in their high cheekbones and almond eyes, riding the rows.

In the city itself—to quote Miss Strong—the yellow-grey houses of richer families enclose gardens with pools and stone-flagged paths and trees. Even in the poorer houses the women are kept apart. The stove is under the floor, and stoked from outside to avoid dust. It is a square hole in the floor in which everyone sticks their feet, covered with a heavy quilt. Quilts are the furniture, piled as high as needed. Wealth is in quilts, rugs, and china. There are handsome chests to serve as cupboards, and niches in the walls to display the china. The niches and the walls are all brightly painted. Most windows have a plant growing in the sunlight.

Miss Strong's books of this period may be a little distorted by her non-acquaintance with the native tongue and her slight reluctance toward believing the best of people—an attitude quite reversed in more recent writings—but in the main she was right. She described in 1930 the backwardness of the Uzbek people, difficult to credit. The womenfolk under central Soviet influence formed a society for the abolition of the ‘paranja’—a hideous plaque of close-woven horsehair which all women were compelled to wear from the top of the head to the waist; for the abolition of the buying of wives; for the abolition of polygamy; for the opening of careers for women, and for other rights that to us seem the commonplaces of society.

In the remoter places brave girls who tried to further these reforms as late as 1928 in the remoter regions were tortured and slain. Inevitably they were first raped, frequently by

members of their own family connection. In one case a girl, having been so treated, was cut into small pieces which were delivered to her home in a cart. The gentry of the village, or others who disapproved of the new movement, and expressed their displeasure in this abominable way, always escaped punishment. Sometimes they were tried, never executed, seldom imprisoned, and usually acquitted.

At first the new civilising influence was absorbed into the old ways. Mullahs joined the Communist Party to preserve or to extend their power. New and well-meaning officials, who had heard of no other methods of government, naturally worked on bribes and brutality. "The conception of an impersonal law code and a judge in theory unmoved by emotion is alien to Central Asia. . . . The judge is still expected to rely on his 'revolutionary conscience,' more to be an agent of the social revolution than to maintain an impartial aloofness."<sup>1</sup> And when the headman of a village had abused his now Soviet-recognised power and become a capitalist, the C.P. representative was advised by fellow-members for all their sakes not to expel him from the party, as he was the village sorcerer.

That was in 1928. And yet as early as 1916 there had been collective action against oppression—against the conscription of native labour. It was suppressed bloodily by the General who was Governor of Turkestan. And again, a month before the October Revolution, the Soviets of Tashkent seized power—but prematurely, and were crushed by Kerensky. But as soon as their independence was established, theatres appeared.

Uzbekistan is cotton country. It is the largest cotton producer in the Union. But in the valleys there is much rice and fruit canning; and in the desert the valuable caracul sheep are pastured, so there are mills for wool as well as cotton and silk in the towns. Fertiliser plants and the usual hydro-electric stations add a further industrial population, including, of course, women, who have equal rights with men throughout the Union. The Uzbek people are Turkish

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Strong, *Red Star in Samarkand* (London, 1930), p. 282.

with a small admixture of Persian; and many Russian families intermarry with them—descendants of Tsarist business men and engineers.

When I was in Moscow in 1927 the Uzbek Theatre had just finished a season there. I saw some of the actors at the Opera one evening. The possessiveness of the Uzbek male is almost understandable. Two of the women had the most perfect faces I have ever seen.

Before the Revolution the only elements of drama in Uzbekistan were the quickfire backchat bandied about in the bazaar in a circle of listeners, puppet-shows with topical gags, dervishes and dancers on tight-ropes, and the Bakhshi delighting their listeners with folk-tales recited in metre.<sup>1</sup> In Tashkent, in one of the filthiest of town markets, which bears the title of ‘The Drunks’ Market,’ there used to appear troupes of wandering actors who amused the masses and lived on pitiful charity. On the site of that Blotto Bazaar now stands one of the finest theatre-buildings in the Union, designed by Shchusev, the designer of the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square. This is the Uzbek State Opera. And in this and other cities altogether there are now more than fifty theatres. In their own language the Uzbeks hear the works of Shakespeare,<sup>2</sup> Schiller, Lope de Vega, Pushkin, and Gorky. And they have a body of national dramatists, Yashen (who wrote the play *Gulsar*), Ymarjan Ismailov, Ankobai, Fatkhulin, and others. It has been a struggle not only against the Tsarists and the Mohammedans, but against chauvinists in their own ranks, who wanted a conservative, not a progressive art.

The chief theatre of Tashkent is named after Khamza, a seventeenth-century Uzbek poet. The production of *Othello* here is remarkable for the richness of its costumes; but that the Uzbek Theatre is not mere spectacle is clear from a close-up photograph I have seen of Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Tashkent Theatre of the Red Army.

<sup>1</sup> Ya. G. Gorbunov, Chairman of the Committee for Art Affairs, in an article on Uzbek art in *Театральная декада*, 1937, No. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Translations by the Uzbek national poet Gafur-Guliam, whose portrait was to be seen at the Soviet Exhibition in Britain in 1941.

He wears a correct Elizabethan ruff; but he is no dummy figure of fun. On the contrary this face is a sensitive one, as indeed was the soul of Falstaff under his fleshy outside.

Before the Revolution there was a movement of the masses in the bazaar towards the edge of an Uzbek Theatre. The varying rhythms of tight-rope dancers, acrobats, and others were fusing. But "there was no more despised calling in the East than that of the popular actor,"<sup>1</sup> and it was easy for the mullahs and the satraps of the Tsar to control this movement. It was the old story of Japan, India, China, and privileged or dominating classes the world over. Yet in 1913 this embryo drama did break out. A drama called *Patricide* by the Uzbek writer Mukhmu'd Khodja Bekbud was staged—a nationalistic work with a purely middle-class outlook and moral; and a little school of didactic playwrights sprang up, trying to 'civilise' the ignorant masses through the theatre. It was a very poor attempt at a drama, because in all Turkestan there were scarcely a dozen men who could act, and that women should do so was unthinkable. The chief performer was the prompter (continental style), after whom the actors intoned their lines, in a fashion neither realistic nor the beautiful chanting of the 'Noh' or the King-Diau. The place was a tent or a platform in a street.

In 1919, however, a group of actors including Manan Uigur, now the principal theatrical figure of Uzbekistan, got together in a collective and toured the front with dramatic exhortations and support for the soldiers fighting the British—mostly translations of one-act plays. Out of the need of the Uzbek masses the Bakhshi became actors—and real actors, who formed a real theatre in 1920 at Tashkent. The middle-class nationalists continued to fight them in terms of theatre. The Pan-Turk dramatist Fitrat pounded out patriotic pageants, with stilted dialogue and any costumes that were handy, irrespective of time and place. And the Revolutionary plays were scarcely better. Plainly, if the progressive theatre was to win, it had to study.

<sup>1</sup> I. Iras, Творческий путь узбекского академического театра драмы им. Хамза. (Moscow-Tashkent), 1936, p. 15.

In 1924 in Moscow at the Stalin Uzbek Institute, largely through the efforts of Ikramov, the Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, and with the help of the poet Khamza,<sup>1</sup> a theatrical studio was formed, of seventeen players, tutored by actors from the Vahtangov Theatre, and by Sverdlin, a pupil of Meierhold. In 1927 this unit returned to Uzbekistan and opened a season with *Princess Turandot*, produced by Simonov, Basov, and Tolchanov—a fine trio of imposing names. Their repertory also included three contemporary Soviet plays translated into the Uzbek tongue.

The effect was magical. Uzbek dramatists sprang up, writing Soviet plays about Uzbek problems and the great deeds of the Civil Wars in Turkestan. The stories were true, and the acting truthful. The Uzbek Theatre had to reorganise itself. What road should it take?

Surviving nationalists argued that European methods were foreign to the Uzbek people, Gogol and Shakespeare meant nothing to them. They liked circuses and show-booths. The progressives replied that the Uzbek Theatre should not develop on levels to which the oppressed people had been kept, but should work up to higher levels from the best tradition of folk-art. As there was no tradition of Uzbek drama, their drama must obviously be founded on the best tradition of national life; as the Revolution was based on the worker and peasant, and the worker and peasant are international, their heritage obviously included the great works of all nations; so they proceeded to stage Goldoni, Lope de Vega, Gogol, and *Hamlet*, adding contemporary plays like *Roar, China!* (Tretyakov), *Joy Street*, *Intervention*, and Pogodin's *My Friend*. And the arguments ended in the fact that the people came again and again to plays that convinced by their truth and intrigued the mind with their novelty.

Perhaps the novelty became too strong. When you are practically dictating a new theatre, there is a temptation to domineer. Your ideas as producer may seem more important

<sup>1</sup> Khamza Khakim Zade Niyazi—poet, first Uzbek novelist, musician, and dramatist. Wrote more than a dozen plays, including the four *Fergana Tragedies*, the first Uzbek comedy, and musical works. Murdered by religious fanatics in 1929, when he was little more than forty years of age.

than the ideas of the audience. You may claim that you are adapting into your production the 'idioms' of popular puppet-shows when in fact you are only indulging your own mental inclinations. Puppet-shows may grow into full popular theatrical performances. They did so in Japan. They might have done so in Uzbekistan, if left to themselves, and evolved a new sort of stepping-stone to realism. But with the nationalists using this tendency for their political ends, it was too dangerous politically to allow them; and Ikramov was right to press for a fully educated theatre.

In these circumstances perhaps the influence of the Vahtangov Theatre was unfortunate. The Vahtangov tradition is a slippery one; with a very little mishandling, it becomes formalist. Simonov's Uzbek *Turandot* was a copy of the Moscow one. The young Uzbek Uigur was influenced by it, not altogether for his good. And the production of *Roar, China!* was pure Meierhold. What had these after-tastes of a jaded middle-class palate to do with the new life and freedom of the Uzbek cotton planter or fruit picker, forging his own fresh culture? What had they to do with his own traditions, when he had never known the smart stuffiness of Petersburg or the prosperous boredom of Moscow?

So the Tashkent Theatre that proudly bore the name of the great Uzbek poet Khamza had to think again. The producer V. Vitt showed a more actual way in 1935 when he staged Yashen's *Honour and Love*, a play about the conflicts between the new-style woman and her husband with one foot still in the past. Plainly puppets were out of place here. The theme was too familiar, and human beings too interesting, among the audience. And from then on this was the path taken by the theatre.

It does not play only in Tashkent, nor only in Uzbekistan. Tataria, Azerbaijan, Turkmenia—it toured these between 1930 and 1933. It has celebrated its fifteenth and twentieth birthdays. It has received awards and honours from the central theatre world. Its actresses' names are known and respected all over the republic. It has a touring sub-theatre for the outlying settlements and collective farms. It has a

studio-school. It has a building and foundation of its own. The Revolution loosened the tongue, and brought a new note of happiness into the songs, of Uzbekistan. Careful thinking has given Uzbekistan a valuable and truthful theatre, both in plays that are written and in the acting of those plays.

## 2. *Tadjikstan*

In 1929 Anna Louise Strong rode up into the Pamirs, a mighty and barren mountain range which contains Mounts Lenin and Stalin, the highest points of the Union. The Pamirs, parts of which were practically unexplored except by a few officer amateurs in Tsarist days, were then part of Uzbekistan; they are now included in the Tadjik country to the south and east, which borders on China and almost neighbours Kashmir.

She did not greatly enjoy her journey over the ‘Roof of the World,’ but she wrote an interesting book about it, *The Road to the Grey Pamir*.<sup>1</sup> She describes the Tadjiks as a proud people, who once ruled the rich lands of Central Asia, but by conqueror after conqueror they were pushed back from their rich lands to the hungry hills, keeping their traditional poetry, songs, and dances. Out of such stock they are breeding a new theatre.

Down to the capital Dushembe, now renamed Stalinabad, on foot, horse, or donkey come the naïve, wondering hill-men. They cannot believe that Moscow is any greater or more advanced than this modern city with its trams and railway terminus. In the valleys of the south-west, where Stalinabad is, the hot Afghan wind dries the soil, but irrigation makes cotton plentiful. In the north, the most fertile place is the famous Ferghana Valley, which reaches up into Southern Kirghizia. Here barley will grow, but not wheat. In the mountains minerals are mined, especially tin and molybdenum.

The Tadjik Theatre was founded ten years ago. It opened with Yashen’s *Two Communists*. During the preparation of this, so simple were the minds of the native actors that one

<sup>1</sup> Boston, 1931.

of them, fresh from a village life, murdered his young wife, being so impressed by her powers in a love-scene with another actor that he thought she was unfaithful.<sup>1</sup> Yet last year the same theatre produced *Othello* on Pushkin's formula that "Othello is not jealous. On the contrary, he is trusting." And the sets reproduce Venice and Cyprus in all their Renaissance magnificence, making good stage use of steps and different levels.

In the Tadjik language there is no blank verse convention; but the translators of *Othello* (Lakhuti and Banu) are said to have been so successful in finding an equivalent that they went on to do *Romeo and Juliet*. Culture comes back to the people and to the soil. "It was originally believed," said Professor Baranov of the Central Asian University,<sup>2</sup> "that agriculture was impossible in the eastern section of the Pamirs. But it turns out that these factors, individually having an unfavourable influence on plant life, together actually create favourable conditions. . . . They facilitate the accumulation of sugar in plants."

Similar things might be said of the people and their theatre. The 'Lakhuti' Theatre at Stalinabad (formerly Dushembe) was founded in 1929. It has had a hard struggle since those early days, when it was composed of eleven persons in a Musical Club. Uzbek influence has always been noticeable here. Their first Director was Khamid Makhmudov, a Tadjik who afterstudying in the Uzbek Technicum in Moscow had been playing at the Khamza Theatre in Tashkent. Their first home was an old building that had seen many uses, a political school, a hospital, etc. During their first two years their numbers swelled to seventeen by the accretion of some graduates of the Musitechnicum, including a well-known Tadjik musician Airapetyants. So far their work was mainly musical.

But spurred by the success of the Uzbek Theatre, they began to include in their concerts little propaganda plays, for

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Hon. Art. of the U.S.S.R., M. Kasymov, the leading Tadjik actor, reported in *Moscow Daily News*, April 24, 1941.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview reported in *Moscow News*, December 24, 1941.

example *The Hypocritical Ishan*, in which a certain Ishan makes improper proposals to a young girl, who at first spurns him, then seems to give way, and as he approaches her, lowers her veil (*paranja*) and reveals ‘herself’ as a young man. Hurried and mortified exit of Ishan. These agit-prop playlets maddened the kulaks, and the actors had often to face firearms; but little by little their numbers increased. Umarov, whom Makhmudov had known in the Uzbek studio, joined them from the Tashkent Workers’ Theatre, and Mirkarim Saidov.

*The Two Communists* was followed by other translations from the Uzbek, and Uzbek influence extended in other ways, not altogether for the good. A play in which a girl is affianced to a rich bey, but prefers to kill herself (a very immediate and urgent theme in this country), was staged rather artily in a spider’s web.

The first Tadjik play (1933) was *Muboriza* (= *The Struggle*) by Abdulkhair Usmanov—the struggle being that against the Basmaches (counter-revolutionary bandits in Central Asia) from 1925 onward. It was not a very good play, by all accounts, but it gave the Tadjik audience pride and national consciousness. The same year saw the theatre specialised as a purely dramatic organisation, and in 1934 V. Tihanovich was sent from Moscow to ‘professionalise it.’ Under his guidance it worked toward a Tadjik Theatre, as opposed to an Uzbek. But his idea of a self-conscious Tadjik art was a symbolic one. In a play that showed the rotting nature of feudalism, the Shah’s palace was given deep cracks in the walls, a lop-sided throne, bloodstains on the pillars, and other such improbable and distracting devices; also the actors intoned their lines instead of speaking them. But, after a short civil war inside the spiritual walls of the stage, Tihanovich was got rid of, and in his place in 1937 came a young producer, E. Mitelman, from the Moscow GITIS. His ideas followed those of Stanislavsky, and he was a good organiser. The theatre flourished and became actual, producing plays about the problems of the opposition to the kholkozes, the enemies of the people, and such themes from real life.

Special children's matinées were arranged; and puppet-shows.

The Lakhuti Theatre now has a complement of forty-six professional actors (sixteen women and thirty men). Its most outstanding shows recently have been Mitelman's production of *Othello* and Saidov's production of *Shodman*, by a young Tadjik writer Ulug-zade, who had learned playwriting in the course of his job as translator to the theatre. This latter play is said to be a picture of the Tadjiks as they really are: clever or stupid, serious or gay. It is the story of an innovator in a kholkoz, who is a 'shock-brigader' and thinks out a new and better way of treating the cotton. The president of the farm and his supporters think the scheme is too risky; after some lobbying and disputes, they deprive the shock-brigader of his office. In his place they appoint a new man, who is in fact a friend of Shodman's, and puts his ideas into practice. The play ends on a slightly romantic note, with a long-distance telephone conversation with Stalin himself. It is episodic in form, and full of exciting turns and events.

Further plays in prospect are two historical dramas, and a new play by Ulug-zade about the liquidation of the Bas-maches.

Against such odds have the native people of Tadjikstan created their own theatre.

### 3. *Kirghizia*

There was a Kirghizian Empire in the first and second centuries B.C., according to a Chinese source. But little is known of it. The Kirghiz seem to have been nomads by nature and habit for thousands of years. Turkish tribes won them to Islam in the ninth century and Genghiz Khan made them his allies in the twelfth century; the Uzbeks in the north pressed on them, and the Kalmucks from China in the sixteenth century. When the Chinese massacred the Kalmucks in the eighteenth century, the Kirghiz drifted again out of their mountains, and were the last people to make a stand against Tsarist Russia. That was as late as 1875.

The Tsars gave them some sort of land tenure, but it was ineffective. They are still a remote, pastoral people, their wealth in cattle still greater than the produce of agriculture.

Like the Uzbeks (many of whom are to be found in Kirghizia), they anticipated the Bolshevik Revolution, rebelling against the Tsarist appropriation of sheep to feed the troops in 1916. The Tsarists gave them rubles in exchange, but they did not use money, and therefore considered the action robbery. In revenge they murdered all the Russians they could find.

Such was the wild and backward people whom the Soviet Union invited to join them in the early days of its formation. But it is one of the attractions of Soviet life that it can induce nomads and gipsies to abandon their roving ways and undertake their responsibilities as citizens.

It should not be supposed that there are no towns in their country. Even nomads have zimovki—winter quarters, clay-built encampments by foaming brown streams in a land of poppies and lupins. Osh, the capital of South Kirghizia, was the native place of Sultan Babur, who, after losing, retaking, and relosing the Ferghana Valley to the Uzbeks, abandoned the whole matter and founded the Mogul dynasty at Agra in 1530 instead.

Not far off is ‘Solomon’s Throne,’ a big rock, where, by placing your limbs in the hollows caused by the weight of this wise man, you can cure yourself of rheumatic afflictions. That this is not a nomad miracle was proved when Soviet science discovered it to be due to the action of the second of the two largest radium deposits in the world. It was this, as well as the grass round Osh, which made the place a centre for caravans between Kashgar, Thibet, and Hindustan; and it was on the route to Mecca from Chinese Turkestan; and more recently workers came from China to pick cotton in the Ferghana Valley.

So now the nomads are settling. Their instinct of mobility is used for transferring cattle to seasonal pastures. Hundreds of schools are available. Motor roads connect Osh with other capitals; a railway carries off the grain of the Ferghana

Valley, and sugar from beet, and tobacco. A wild plant of the district has a stronger fibre than any other plant for spinning—kendyr; but chiefly it is stock-raising on which the land depends, and on the coal-mines now fast developing.

In place of old Pishpek, the Kirghiz people have built Frunze, their modern capital, with universities, factories, theatres. There are 100,000 inhabitants. In 1926 a theatre studio was organised among some young people, under the management of N. N. Yelenin, who wrote a little anti-religious playlet and had it translated into Kirghiz. The first Kirghiz play was written by Moldogaza Tokobayev, now head of the Kirghiz Philharmonium. It dealt with the sale of a girl to a man she didn't love. In 1928 this group became the Kirghiz State Theatre, and local writers began to translate Ostrovsky and other Russian classics. Djantoshev wrote another Kirghiz play on the same theme as Tokobayev's, but making it more dramatic; and a second work, *Enemies of the Collective Farm. Revizor* was done. In 1934, Furmanov's *Rebellion*. Kirghiz operas were written. Local dances were noticed and used. The first Kirghiz ballet was done in 1939.

In 1932, a young Kirghiz actor and producer, Sarbagishev, organised a dramatic club in a bread factory. They acted mainly to children, and toured the whole country, as the State Theatre did; and out of this came the Kirghiz Tyuz, which gives native plays on native epic themes, as well as translations of foreign writers like Lope de Vega, and also—in 1939—a play about contemporary Kirghizia by Sarbagishev himself.

Already by 1939, strange though it may sound, there were seventeen theatres in this babyish republic. The native musical dramas are the most popular—*The Golden Maiden*, *The Moonlight Beauty*, and *Not Death, but Life*. The titles sound romantic and childish, but the subjects are not. *The Moonlight Beauty*, which is really the first Kirghiz opera, is based on the Kirghiz epic 'Manas'; *Not Death, but Life* describes the historic flight of a million Kirghiz people into China after the Tsarist Government had crushed their rising.



Khassia, the young Kazakh orphan who became a famous actress, is received by Jamboul, the Bard of the Steppes.



Goldoni in the mountains of Asia. Khassia plays *The Servant of Two Masters* among a group of shepherds and technicians.

in 1916 (they did not return till 1918); and *The Golden Maiden* describes the prosperity of the new collective farms and their struggles against remnants of the enemy class.

The Kirghiz Theatre held a festival in Moscow in 1939.

Shakespeare also is popular. The poet Kasymbek Eshmambetov has translated *Othello*, which was produced in Kirghizia as early as 1937–8, and he has since turned to *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, all of which are in rehearsal or preparation.

#### 4. Turkmenistan

Eighty-five per cent. of the territory of the Turkmenian Republic will be shown on non-Soviet physical maps as desert, the terrible Black Sands which even the railway from the Caspian Sea dare not cross, but skirts it on the south along the frontier of Persia, till it can hurry north-east to Bokhara and Samarkand. Yet by no means all of this desert is still barren. Soviet aeroplanes have sown it with plants that root down to the moisture below the sand. The waters of a great river are about to be diverted to irrigate it; since man in community can alter the very sides of Nature which have hitherto defeated and terrified man in separation. Already, as far as this 100-kilometre canal-river has got, there are reeds and poplars in the desert; birds nest in a man-created oasis; wheat, cotton, and lucerne spring up. Desert pastures are organised and used by plan, not wastefully haphazard; the desert collective farm is becoming a reality. Men gather melons and cut salads of vegetables from their desert gardens. Barley has ripened without being watered.

But other finds were made. Great oil spouts were released in the mountains; great deposits of mirabilite, sulphur, and other minerals have led to chemical works being set up on the shores of the curious sea-loch referred to on p. 36, and elsewhere. For by Soviet policy, the works goes to the supply, not the supply to the works.

So even the desert spaces of Turkmenistan are being peopled, or re-peopled—for deserts are often the handiwork of greedy ignorance, not liberal Nature. And the new

present war, General Panfilov's 8th Guards Division being specially full of them.<sup>1</sup> Although they are primarily horsemen of the steppe, they have proved themselves as able tank-drivers, gunners, and pilots as any man; and when the war is over this also will be reflected in their theatre.

<sup>1</sup> *Moscow News*, January 12, 1942.

CHAPTER V

## The Arctic Circle and Other Backward Audiences

It is not only the national theatres which tour the remote regions of their countries. The Moscow and Leningrad Central Theatres have regular rounds in the most unlikely places. A special Travelling Arctic Theatre set out in 1935. They left the Trans-Siberian Railway at Krasnoyarsk (roughly in the latitude of Edinburgh and longitude of Lhasa) and travelled down the Yenisei River to Dickson Island, thence by ship through the dangerous Kara Sea south of Novaya Zemlya to Murmansk, giving performances at each township and settlement on the way. Costumes, properties, and some nuclear scenery were packed in boxes which put together formed an ingenious stage.

The following year on a six months' tour they started farther east, by Yakutsk on the Lena River, taking ship at Tixie Bay through the Polar Seas and Behring Strait to Kamchatka and Vladivostok.

In 1937 they worked various river and sea routes in the extreme north, leaving out the mainland between Dickson Island and Tixie Bay, which they reserved for the following year, and so on, returning to Moscow at the end of each tour. On the 1937 tour at a saw-mill centre, Belogorye, on the river Ob (near the Urals), the party encountered tremendous spring floods. The performance was to be in a clubhouse which was cut off by water. But this was a trifle. Both company and audience paddled to the clubhouse in boats or on rafts, and a high-spirited performance took place to the satisfaction of everybody.

By these means some 400 performances had been given by this one theatre alone at the end of 1937. But there are others. A company from the Maly Theatre at Moscow followed the Arctic Theatre down the Yenisei in 1936.

but bigger herds. One herdsman only was needed where perhaps twenty had wasted their time before. And only herdsmen need follow the deer from pasture to pasture; other people are free for other tasks. In other words, the old nomadic existence becomes unnecessary; and the next step is possible—the division of labour. Modern methods meant greater leisure. The toil of Arctic life is no less arduous, but there is less of it, and more time to enjoy and learn about life.

When life becomes interesting and there are opportunities to benefit by leisure, and there is a collective sense, there is sure to be a demand for a theatre. And so there was in the Chukotka Peninsula. A young pioneer named Ankakemen, becoming interested in the theatre during his course at the Leningrad Institute, went home and wrote a play in the Chukcha tongue. Now, not only Chukchi but Eskimos too are writing and producing plays in their own languages.

Besides the Nentsi, Mansi, Chukchi, and Eskimos, there are other peoples, the Evenki, Vogul, Khantsi, and Yakut peoples, learning to read and write, and to print books and newspapers in their own tongues. Theatres are appearing everywhere. At Yakutsk, for example, a town in Eastern Siberia, where the Lena River bulges nearest to the Pacific, there has been a vigorous theatre for four years. A nucleus of six performers returned from training in Moscow in 1936, bringing with them ideas for a production of Molière's *Tartuffe*, which had a special appeal for the people of that region, who saw in that pious hypocrite an exact portrait of their own Shamans.<sup>1</sup> Their own dramaturgy includes a work called *The Red Shaman*, which shows how Soviet science fights ignorance and disease together.

A more splendid vindication of Molière as a man of great human understanding can hardly be imagined than this applicability of his characters to places and people he could hardly have dreamed of. And it is also a clear example of

<sup>1</sup> The writer of a recent rather ill-natured book called *Soviet Asia* defends these Shamans as having a culture worth saving. He also supports a nomadic culture in other parts of Siberia. An interesting, if unusually frank, *reductio ad absurdum* of prejudiced opposition to Stalin's leadership.

what is meant by Socialist Realism. Side by side with the cunning, privileged impostor Shaman of their own day, the people of these pagan tribes come to know the cunning, privileged impostors of other religions in the past of the culture which they are now entering by virtue of the gold they mine for it and their larch-timber as durable in water as any metal.

With the help of the Central Theatres in any respect they need—as we shall be discussing later—they build up their productions by their own knowledge and study. And so it is in many other places in Siberia. In Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Buryat-Mongolian Republic (on the southern and eastern shores of Lake Baikal), it must be faintly amusing for the western spectator to see these high-cheeked, almond-eyed Mongoloid faces in western make-up under correct Louis XIV long curly wigs and high head-dresses; and not a little moving for the hitherto more educated western eye to note that the window at the back of the set is quite out of the period picture, with its plain square lights and suburban French-window frame. But what does this matter? *Tartuffe* is proving its *all-gemeinheit*: and such little inaccuracies can be corrected later on.

It is the same with *Othello* and *King Lear*—the latter specially liked in Buryat-Mongolia because its plot bears some resemblance to a theme in local folk-lore, as it is, for the same reason, in Kazakhstan. In the case of this play the ‘Socialist Realism’ gives a deeper significance than is possible in the West End of London, where very rare performance is due only to the vanity or intelligence of a single actor-manager, and the audience and critics think the plot ‘improbable.’

Before 1918 this country had no theatre. It had no written language. All the writing was done by Lamas, who used an obsolete Mongolian script. By 1940 there was a Buryat-Mongolian Theatre, a Russian Dramatic Theatre, two State Farm Theatres, and special organisations for children. Besides the plays already mentioned, Schiller’s *Intrigue and Love* was in the repertory, Pogodin’s *The Man with the Gun*, and

other contemporary Soviet plays. The first Buryat-Mongolian opera was ready for production in that year, and a festival was held in Moscow.

In the Oirotsk Autonomous Area—which is fast becoming a Siberian Switzerland—a holiday ground for workers from the new towns in the Kuznetsk area, a theatre had been wanted for years. In 1932 a lone pioneer-play was produced, *Struggle*, by Pavel Kuchiyak, an Oirot writer, and an agitation started. In 1936 a success at the Olympiad of Western Siberian peoples led the regional C.P. Committee and District Executive Committee to found a studio-theatre for the Kolkhozes. Training began in October, under I. S. Zabrodin, an enthusiastic producer, who had no experience of regional work and didn't know the Altai language. Twenty-five young Altai men and women studied and acted for five years. They began with one-act plays and excerpts from Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. In March 1937 they gave their first full-length production—Furmanov's *Chapayev*—among the mountain farms. Then came a stage version by Churkin of *Virgin Soil Upturned*, Sholohov's superb novel about the organising and encouraging of a large-scale farm in the face of much obstinate opposition. This was so popular that the Zozonchi—singers and composers of folk-songs—improvised minstrels in praise of the young theatre unit. The same year the unit gave Ostrovsky's *Storm*, the Russian Ibsen's acknowledged master-work, which tragically describes how the bigotry of a religious household drove a young wife to a gesture of freedom and to suicide. This had plenty of relevance to life in Oirotsia.

In 1938, realising their dream, they produced a full-length native play by Kuchiyak, which has a similar heroine to that of *The Storm*, but a more positive ending, for the girl flees with her lover to a life of activity and freedom, becoming chairman of a revolutionary committee, and her lover, formerly a labourer, finds his métier as a Red Army Commander.

Conditions are not perfect. There are few rehearsal facilities and only two small rooms to work in; the company

is only two dozen people, with no understudies. Yet concerts as well as plays are organised—with native music sung by a trained native chorus, and a native orchestra playing the national instruments, topshury, ikili, and shoor.

In 1940 they toured the Novosibirsk region, playing to audiences from the railway-workers of the taiga, and industrial workers and office staffs in the principal towns. Having enlarged their range with Goldoni's *Servant*, in 1941 they gave another play by Kuchiyak, *The Pits*, Molière's *Médecin*, Virta's *Earth*, and another Ostrovsky. This present year, which is the twentieth anniversary of the creation of Oirotia, they will celebrate their own fifth birthday by producing the first Oirotian musical play, *Kanza-biy*.

Some of these backward areas reach a very high dramatic quality. In the portion of the North Caucasus called Chechen-Ingutia there has been at Grozny, the capital, a theatre which has existed for eleven years. As in Oirotia, a good producer (in this case Honoured Artist Haroun Al Raschid Batukayev), a competent artist (E. Bernhard), and a good musician (A. Alexandrov) have set a standard which native genius has flared up and attained itself, though working under primitive conditions. Here the most popular play (produced in 1938) is a translation from the Georgian of *Kikila the Bold* by Nakhutsrishvili and Gamrekeli, which has become native by the genius of the actor Movshedin Baduyev, who has used the dialogue of the Georgian playwrights to create a real native comic figure, comparable with Soldier Schweik, or Christy Mahon, or Charlie Chaplin. Baduyev, though he is only twenty-three, has been seven or eight years on the stage, and has become so identified with Kikila that, even when he appears in other plays, his audience has an early nineteenth-century habit of calling out 'Kikila! Kikila!' no matter what character or make-up he bears.

This Kikila the Bold is a ragged peasant, clumsy in manner and gait, good-natured, mischievous, quick-witted, and very human. He plays all kind of practical jokes, the consequences of which terrify him; his changing feelings spread over not only his face, but his entire body; and he is continu-

ally in situations where he acts several parts at once—aghast at his wife's anger, pleading with his brother, and giving the audience a reassuring wink.

But Baduyev is a sensitive, and not a selfish, actor, and has had great success, in his place in the ensemble, in plays by Lermontov and Bill-Belotserkovsky.

Not all regional theatres have the same unmixed reception. The national theatre in Daghestan, running up the central western coast of the Caspian Sea, and containing wild Caucasian tribesmen, had an early start, but a stormy career.

In 1904, at a place called Akhty, a drama club was got up, and a translation into the Lezgin language of an Azerbaijani play was announced for performance. The commander of the local garrison considered this a dangerous piece of free thinking. The public coming to see the show was accordingly fired on by Russian soldiers, and its organisers were arrested. But with the Revolution, freedom—or the possibility of it—came to the various peoples in Daghestan, Kumyks, Azerbaijanians, Tats, Laks, Lezgins, and Avars.<sup>1</sup> In 1926 a theatre-studio was opened in the Daghestan Musitechnicum, and a young professional theatre opened four years later, which toured the trackless mountains and braved the kulaks and priests.

'Braved' is the word. For the possibility of freedom was not being easily taken. The mullahs said the drama was sinful. The beys (local squires) said the people would lose their bread and cattle. The result was not that the superstitious peasantry stayed away. They attended, in the spirit of the church militant, and stoned the actors. Next day the show was given, as usual. This was in 1930.

As years went by, undeterred by this treatment, the Daghestan theatres continued their task, and developed their repertoire, both translations and original work. *Othello* was done, and a play by a Kumyk writer, Salovatov, which showed Kumyk national heroes resisting the Tsar. A whole-hearted, perhaps over-enthusiastic, realism was used in this, Kumyk, theatre. Real machine-guns were fired. There

<sup>1</sup> Daghestan is roughly the size of England.

was real water in the lake on the stage. Ostrovsky, Lope de Vega, Goldoni, appeared on the notice-boards.

At Buinak on the Caspian Sea the 1939 current production was a play about the Spanish Republic in the Civil War—its title, *Biz Galebis*, means ‘We’re on the Way.’ This was produced by native talent in the person of Arakcheyevsky. Some of the other Daghestan theatres have not such native talent, and must fall back on Russian or Azerbaijani producers who do not know the language. The Kumyk theatre, for example, in 1939 had a Russian producer, Rustamov, who had trained in theory at GITIS—the All-Union Central State Institute.

Further national complications are found at Derbent, where one theatre serves both Azerbaijani and Tat communities, playing to each alternately; so that the unhappy producer has to stage a play in two languages simultaneously, the two sections of the theatre being united under a common management. The reason for this is probably historical, in that it was founded as a dramatic club in the first year of the Revolution, before the different communities had sorted themselves out; and when professionalised in 1933, the same management continued.

Kolkhoz theatres serve the Laks, Avars, and Lezgins, in Kumukh, Khunzakh, and Akhtakh respectively. The last-named town in 1933 celebrated its dramatic club’s twenty-fifth anniversary. A prosperous place, this Akhtakh theatre. It has a fine new building, seating 600, and a state endowment—the reward of years of determined amateur (and later partly professional) struggle. Apart from translated Azerbaijani plays, it has also several works by Lezgin writers.

There is here an interesting sex-differentiation in prices of admission. Men pay one ruble, women only 50 kopeks. This is to attract the women and encourage their theatre-mindedness. The state endowment means that profits are considered of less importance than the raising of the cultural level and self-confidence of women for centuries dominated by Mohammedan males.

But there is give-and-take among the nationalities too; and

the Avar Theatre, founded at Khunzakh in 1935, is directed by a former actor at the Kumyk Theatre.

Not all the backward regions learn so quickly; nor are those which take the wrong turning by any means always those farthest from the Central Theatres.

Kazan, the capital of the Autonomous Tatar Republic, less than five hundred miles east of Moscow, has refused to advance beyond the 'schematised' stage of theatrical development. When their playwrights picture historical events in their past, the poor peasants are always good, the policemen wicked in all ways. The rich bey was always an oppressor, the mullah always a hypocrite. Then comes the Revolution, and all is automatically well. Now, these things were true of the beys, the mullahs, the village policemen, as classes in the class war. For purposes of propaganda it was useful to be blind to such humanity as the landowners had. As an abstraction, it is still historically true. But it is bad theatre. The theatre is no place for abstractions, but for people and the events they cause and share. The truth of history, the truth even of life, do not necessarily coincide with the truth of the stage. The Tatar dramatists tend to bring class-symptoms on to the stage, dressed up in human clothes; so the emphasis shifts from what they think and feel, to how they walk or wear their clothes. And the Kazan producers tend to offset this 'schematisation' with an unjustified use of natural things—if they want a hut on the set, it is said by one critic,<sup>1</sup> they faithfully copy a hut they have seen somewhere, and think that because it is a real hut their production is a Socialist-Realistic one.

It is in fact nothing of the sort. The Socialist Realist, author or actor, has his mind and emotions all the time on the individuals that compose his audience. The Socialist-Realist producer, as Popov has said,<sup>2</sup> must "know how to learn from the community with which he is working, to listen to the collective and to trust its taste more. The *régisseur* must

<sup>1</sup> V. Leskov, *The Theatre at Kazan*. Article in *Teatr*, 1940, No. 7, pp. 136 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> At the Conference of Producers, 1939, described by Dmitri Kalm: *Int. Lit.*, 1939, No. 10, pp. 71–8.

know how to liberate and utilise the actor's creative imagination." Between them, they create a theatre of truth which has an urgency for the listening public. If the audience is composed of individuals, then there is little to be gained by entertaining them with abstractions, which are theories that have gone out of circulation and become conventions. The history of the world-theatre, as I am showing elsewhere, is the history of popular movements, once free and genuine, adopted and desiccated by aristocrats or priests into rigid conventions that finally wither away; and the great figures of the drama, from Aeschylus onwards, have sought to increase, not decrease, the humanity and truth which nowadays we conveniently call 'realism.' It would be strange if the Soviet system, in freeing the individual life, throttled the individual in culture. It would be strange if it deprived the stage of human values when its aim is to fill life itself with human values. It would be strange if, in fighting the Fascist negation of the individual will in the assertion of a caste system, it turned actors into marionettes, manipulated by a single stage-Gauleiter.

Yet there are certain special audiences which have a common element of occupation or categorisation; such as in other countries might tend to make them abstractions rather than men. We must turn our attention to these, asking whether the Soviet system does have such an effect on them, and if so, whether there is a 'schematic' theatre to correspond to their way of life.

## CHAPTER VI

### Special Audiences

THE whole Soviet Union is now covered with a network of so-called ‘collective farms.’ We have considered the reindeer farms of the far north, the ex-nomad cattle farms of the south-east, and it must be clear that the phrase ‘collective farm’ is misleading. It is indeed almost a mistranslation of the telescopic abbreviation ‘*kolkhoz*,’ which means arable or pasture land held in common. Our English expression involuntarily calls up a picture of something between a land settlement and an agricultural college. This is far from the fact. Thousands of collective farms have new, up-to-date buildings, for work and for living in. But in many cases the word ‘*kolkhoz*’ simply denotes an entire village which has collectivised its ownership and ways of using the common land. The ‘farmers’ still live in their old houses, though, of course, better conditions, pride, and emulation have made wonderful improvements in these.

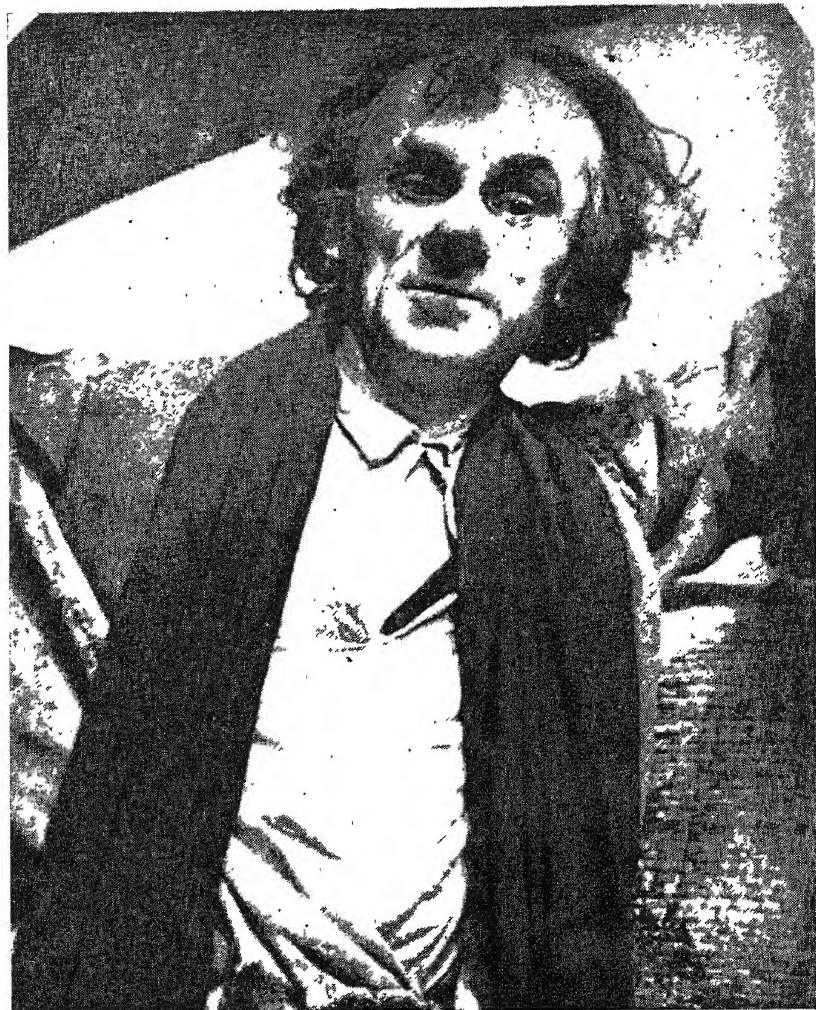
There are also the *sovkhозes* or State-run farms, which are model settlements mainly built for the purpose.

Now each of these rural communities, State farm, collective farm, or collectivised village, has in most cases its own theatre building. Plays are performed there by three types of company: a local amateur company (or a series of these) from the community itself; a district professional company which spends its time touring the local farms; or the professional theatres on tour from the nearest large town, or Moscow and Leningrad. But whereas the provincial towns have audiences mixed not only in occupation but even, as we have seen, in race, culture, and language, the collective-farm theatres have audiences more or less homogeneous in all aspects. This makes them curiously well united in their interests.

Amateur acting is not entirely new in the western rural



A theatre-unit travels the collective farms. This is a rank-and-file company performing a one-act comedy by Fonvesin in a fit-in in the Gorky district.



A character study by an amateur: Grumio in *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Moscow Caoutchouc Rubber Works Dramatic Club.

This production has reached its 100th performance.

areas. In the district of Gdov, for instance, near Leningrad, in 1896, the villagers of Gdov Vyezd (now called Podolshye) produced a play, *Yermak*, which was promptly suppressed by the Tsar's officials. Two years later they did another play, *Stepan Razin*, and in the early years of the new century a third, about the Emperor Maximilian.

There must have been some vital village Irving alive then; his influence has lasted. In 1917 the local school-teacher took down some of the local songs, and he and others used them in a play, called *Old Times in Gdov*, which came to the Moscow Theatre of People's Art (founded for such discoveries) in 1939. It is a sad little piece on an odd little theme. Katya loves Yemelyan, a fine young peasant; but her father gives her to a rich widower. Yemelyan arrives to protest and remove her from the wedding ceremony, but he is too late. An excellent scenario for a riot of songs and dances, gay or sad.

The newspaper *Pravda* in 1913, according to Dmitri Kalm,<sup>1</sup> referred to a theatre group organised at the village of Alpatyovo in the Ryazan Province (about a hundred miles south-east of Moscow) through the efforts of some school-teachers. It won considerable favour; and the local council decided to build it a permanent home at Odoevsk. They assigned 300 rubles for the purpose—not a large sum, even in those days. Perhaps £12 10s. But money for public purposes was scarce; and they asked the Ministry of Education to help with a subsidy. The Ministry refused.

There are relics of popular plays from the countryside in the village of Golovkovka in Ukraine; and restorations of these, from the memories of old inhabitants, were to be seen in the Theatre Museum at Kiev, though whether anything remains of them now is a sadder question. No doubt, also, there are relics of yet older plays, ritual-plays, 'St. George' plays, in the wilder parts of the Union, such as exist in Greece and other parts of Europe; but this, though a fascinating subject, is a side of the Soviet Theatre with which this book cannot deal.

<sup>1</sup> *International Literature*, 1939, No. 11, pp. 87–94.

These community theatres were exceptional; and so was Gaibedurov's theatre. In 1903 Pavel Gaibedurov organised a 'popular' theatre in a working-class district of Peterburg. It did many of the Russian classics, but also *Hamlet*, Byron's *Sardanapalus*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and plays by other progressive European dramatists. It was harassed by the authorities, but it did not act only in the city. It travelled so far among the far regions of Russia that it came to be called the 'Travelling Theatre.' The Great War interrupted its activities; but after the Revolution it started again, and continued in Leningrad till 1928. Now, as the 'Theatre of the Leningrad Soviet,' it has been the best of all collective-farm touring theatres for the last seven years.

Before the Revolution there were reckoned to be two hundred and twenty-two amateur dramatic clubs, mostly in the towns, almost entirely among the middle class, and entirely Russian. In 1939, according to Moskvin, the Moscow Art Theatre leading actor, out of the 95,600 clubs in regular existence, some 56,000 are in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> The standard is very high, because many of them are coached and advised by eminent persons in the professional world. The Stalin Motor Works Club at Moscow can get hints from Kedrin, for instance, or Moskvin himself, even though he is a member of the Supreme Council of the U.S.S.R.<sup>2</sup> The Krasny Proletary Works Club has been coached by Meierhold.

There were in 1939 some three hundred permanent theatres touring the collective farms, with an average company of twenty professionals. Some of them, starting from urban centres in themselves remote, travel by dangerous routes to outlandish adventures. The Oirot Collective Farm Theatre, serving the wild Kalmucks on the Mongolian border, has to cover great distances on foot among the Altai Mountains. Once in a far-off mountain village called Abramovo, their arrival coincided with a local festival of which the celebration consisted of a kind of Dorking ball-

<sup>1</sup> I. Moskvin, *The Soviet Theatre* (Moscow, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> A rough, but incomplete, parallel was W. B. Yeats in the Irish Senate.

game, only with knives, and bloody and many fatal results. The two primitive teams were already drawn up in the field when the actors entered it. The actors made a great noise, singing and dancing, which attracted the 'players' attention. They stayed to the performance; and thus for the first time perhaps in several thousand years this particular festival went uncelebrated.

Such remoteness is no exception. There were theatres that toured the steppes of the Crimea, where noot is grown, on the north foothills of the Caucasus (Ossetia, and Chechen-Ingush), and the timber lands of Buryat-Mongolia. Many of these have been to Moscow for training: the theatre which tours the Amur River (in the extreme east, opposite Sakhalin Island) mostly graduated at the Glazounov Theatrical School in Moscow; Khakhas, an autonomous region in Western Siberia above the Oirot Republic, is served by graduates from the Leningrad Central Theatrical School; the goldfields of the Lena River from Moscow, etc. But at Sverdlovsk, in the Urals, it was the local theatre school which formed a permanent company to tour the neighbouring mines and settlements. Though a little out of our own path, it is interesting to note that when collective farmers of the fertile Ferghana Valley were digging a 175-mile canal by their own voluntary efforts, they were entertained by a visit of the Theatre of Uzbek Opera and Ballet from Tashkent. There were 160,000 people at work, and the job lasted forty-five days. The theatre stayed in the district for twelve of these.

At first these collective-farm theatres simply copied the choice of plays in the Central Theatres, doing the Russian classics, or works by their own national writers, or Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Goldoni, Schiller, and Lessing. *The Servant of Two Masters* turns up in collective-farm theatres as in those of regional capitals, but the Kirghizia Collective Farm Theatre varies this by doing Goldoni's *Mirandolina*. Cotton farmers in Uzbek have recently seen Molière's *Médecin Malgré Lui*, Gogol's *Wedding*, and a play by Gorky. But soon they struck out their own paths. In the Gorky Region (old Nizhni-Novgorod) there are several collective-

farm theatres. The stage-director Mass and the founder-actor Kulichenko, of Number 4 Theatre, were enterprising. They wrote their own play, *Gardens in Bloom*. A simple plot: two old men in a collective farm, one a horticulturalist, the other a watchman, have a student son and a student daughter respectively. They hatch a plot to marry them off. The two young people have in fact already got married at the University, but do not tell their old fathers before the most comical misunderstandings take place, which in the end are straightened out. This little piece is interesting because it has also been performed to collectives in the Arctic Circle.

Here the company was originally an amateur one, in the Molotov Motor Works in Gorki town. They were trained by the Moscow Vahtangov Theatre and became professional. Kuznetsov, a twenty-five-year-old character actor, was so gifted that the MXAT offered him an engagement in their company, but he preferred to remain with the collective-farm company.

Soon the barnstormers were anticipating the Central Theatres. Number 1 Collective Farm Theatre of the Moscow District revived in 1939 a famous old play first produced at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, Leningrad, in 1863, but dropped from all Russian repertories. This was Pisemsky's *A Bitter Fate*. In the same year the Harkov Collective Farm Theatre gave the first performance of a Gorky play, *Counterfeit Money*, which has since been produced elsewhere. Ideas for such new productions circulate quickly through widely separated localities by means of conferences to which representatives come from all over the Union. There was such a meeting, a festival at which prize teams gave displays, in Moscow in 1939. It joined up pleasantly with the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition.

The audiences, as may be expected, are exceptionally alert and inspiring. As each tour comes round they get to know the companies personally, thereby having all the advantages of the true local repertory, with none of the staleness that might set in. The companies, also, playing continually to audiences which are, though scattered, all in the same way

of life, get to understand the problems and psychology of the audiences to a more intimate and authentic degree than the best Central Theatres can do with their faithful but motley gatherings. It is perfectly easy to understand why Kutznetsov preferred to remain in the milieu he had chosen.

Collective farms are not all the special audiences in a locality. There may be garrisons or naval ports, where productions of special interest are demanded. Here, too, there is the same mixture of local amateur companies and specialist touring professional companies. Up and down the ports of the Baltic, for example, travels—or travelled and will again travel—the Baltic Fleet Theatrical Company. It was mainly amateur, but many members of it were professional actors doing their statutory service in the Navy. It performed aboard ships, big and small; it visited forts. It was a busy little company, and gave 317 performances in one year. It is apparently particularly pleasant to act with. In 1939, when the professional members were due to be demobilised, they applied for leave to remain in the company. The repertory included the usual Russian classics, but also a play called *The Sea is Ours*, in the writing of which a naval doctor collaborated with a professional author.

The Black Sea Fleet has a similar theatre. In 1937 it gave a play by a bluejacket, *Steering a Steady Course*; and another new play in 1939, *The Cruiser Ochakov*. The Pacific Fleet Theatre at Vladivostok has a wide repertory, including *Tartuffe* and the usual *Servant* and a play on a story by Balzac. It trains its own playwrights, who are in this case naval officers.

But the Central Theatres also visit these distant posts, garrisons, and outposts, such, for example, as the Central Theatre of the Red Army, the Mossovet Theatre, the Vah-tangov Theatre, and special companies of the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1939, Tairov's Kamerny Theatre (see below, p. 93) was at Vladivostok, Voroshilov, and other places in the Far East playing Gorky, Vishnevsky, Eugene O'Neill, Eugène Scribe, etc., and rehearsing revivals of Mayakovsky's

*The Bug*, Lermontov's *Masquerade*, a new production of Molière's *L'Avare*, and a new play founded on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. He said: "We believe that this direct contact with the life of the heroic protectors of the Soviet frontiers, this direct acquaintance with the gallant men, commanders, and political workers of the Red forces, will enrich the creative abilities of the theatre and help us to do justice on the stage to the Great Stalin Era."

These might be fulsome words, but to judge from reviews of *Madame Bovary*, in which Tairov's wife Alice Koonen as Emma Bovary has restored her waning popularity and also started a new career as co-producer, the new Kamerny Theatre has indeed found something valuable to give the public.

The most highly specialised, the most entralling, and (with the possible exception of the semi-religious audiences at the Japanese 'Noh') the most exacting audience in the world is that which rules the Children's Theatres. Russian Children's Theatres have been famous for years. They are one of Russia's proudest inventions. What is interesting now is that out of fifty-two permanent and fully equipped Children's Theatres<sup>1</sup> in the Union, eleven perform in the national tongues of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia. Thus, in 1940, one in Azerbaijan gave a play on a local folk-tale. Armenian children saw *The Bold Nazar* by Demirchyan, the *doyen* of Armenian dramatists. In Georgia there was a play about *The Suram Fortress*. A hundred new plays for children were produced in that year. The Odessa Theatre for Young Spectators forestalled the central theatres with a first production of Paustovsky's *The Constellation of China Dogs*.

There are two distinct kinds of Children's Theatre: 'Children's Theatres' proper, which would more pictur esquely and accurately be rendered 'Nursery Theatres'; and 'Theatres for Young Spectators' (known by the initials

<sup>1</sup> Moscow alone has the following entertainments other than the chief Children's Theatre: The Third Children' Theatre, the Tyuz, the Children's Marionette Theatre, the Marionette Theatre of Children's Books, the Concert Theatre for Children, the Marionette Theatre of the Moscow House of Pioneers.

style as Tyuzi) which are designed for a slightly older audience, from twelve to sixteen.

The first Children's Theatre was opened by Natalie Satz, in whom the Revolutionary outlook was that which favoured the doctrines of Meierhold and Tairov. Her productions tended to make the usual artificial distinctions between good people and bad, the bad being so unpleasant or ridiculous that regular young Soviet theatre-goers must have grown up, like Puritan children, so sure of sin being intrinsically ugly as to fall at once when they discovered it was attractive.

Natalie Satz was removed in 1937, and the newest Children's Theatres now show all sides of the stories they tell. Their subjects are sometimes fairy-stories on folk-lore themes, sometimes Soviet fairy-tales without fairies. In 1938-9 the Moscow Children's Theatre presented such a tale, as if told by a young geology-student. It was a fast-moving piece about gold-prospectors, geologists, hunters, and collective farmers in Siberia; and it was called *Fairy-tale*. Other productions at that time were *Skates*, which title describes its theme, Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire*, and a play by Lev Kassil about life at school.

At one time there was a tendency to bar 'fantasy,' and only instructional, scientific plays were done. This was considered to be suitable for young Soviet-citizens-to-be in preparation for their brave new industrialised world. It was symptomatic of Revolutionary zest. But it was also contrary to the opinion of Lenin himself, who had said in 1922, "Fantasy is a quality of the highest value."<sup>1</sup> This attitude was followed by a swing to the other extreme, when rather namby-pamby 'child-world' entertainment was provided. For the problem of the Children's Theatre Directorates is that of all who have dealings with children all over the world: child-language or precise speech? affection or instruction, or both? and how to satisfy the thirst for knowledge without making the child a prig?

A little reflection will reveal that even here 'Socialist

<sup>1</sup> Report to the C.C. at 11th Congress of the Russian C.P., March 28, 1922 (*Collected Works*, vol. xxxvii).

Realism' can point out a solution by correcting both these tendencies. Keeping in mind the highly specialised and now experienced actors, producers, and authors who have become wise in childhood's wind and weather over many years, it is easy to see that the scope of these theatres is enormous. The fairy-tales of Hans Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, and Perrault are given the dream-like precision and gusto with which farces entertain grown-ups, though at the same time the stories are founded on historical truth. There is no question of 'teaching'—and yet the child is aware that this is just a game. It is the old question of belief in Father Christmas, and treated in the same way. Concretely: the Perrault princess who pricks her finger and falls asleep may be a princess to Soviet children. But the social actuality of princesses means neither hate nor ambition to their hearts. Princesses are as by-gone to them as fairies are to our children—real and not real at the same time. But the Soviet child, without being priggish, knows more about the historical princesses that once were, than the Scottish child knows about the fairies who were originally Picts.

But also there are more obviously 'true' stories by Gogol, Ostrovsky, Dickens, Mark Twain (*The Prince and the Pauper*), Jules Verne, and contemporary writers like Alexey Tolstoy, Kataev, and Trenyev. In many of these there is a historical value, as in those exciting yarns by Henty, and Marryat, and Strang, which so delighted our own youth. The difference is that there is neither need nor occasion to skip the dull, historical pages, as I for one did, because the history is not only intrinsic in the people, but is vivid and exciting. In *The Mysterious Island*, for example, founded on a tale by Jules Verne, the background of the American Civil War is given in the Siege of Richmond, which makes the Prologue. The Moscow Children's Theatre in 1939 presented a play on the invention of printing, with Gutenberg as the hero. That this is not above the heads of children, but, on the contrary, is part of their lives, will be a familiar truth to anyone who was brought up on the True-life stories about Palissy, Edison, Handel, and others in Arthur Mee's *Children's Magazine*; or

to anyone who has watched children listening to similar, if naturally more individualistic, plays presented to them by Derek MacCullouch at the B.B.C.

Indeed Michael Svetlov's play *Fairy-tale* earned considerable, though unjustified, criticism that it was too much an adventure story written in too lyrical a form of verse. True, the characters have somewhat 'type' names—*The Cripple*, *First Searcher*, *The Cradle Family*—but that they are also convincing as people is plain in the emotions of the audience when the Traitor steals the Gold-prospectors' plans, puts their guns out of action, dooms them to starvation, and even is not beyond plotting the murder of the young girl-student Katya. In fact this play, like the sets by Vishnevetskaya and Fradkin which combine the hilly scenery of Siberia with the caverns of the fairy-tale, and the music of Oransky which is heroic and lyrical yet also full of humour and high spirits, does apparently succeed in expressing Soviet life in the form of a fairy-story.

The cost of any given production works out at 6 rubles a head of the spectators. This is obviously too high a price for any young person to pay; so the State subsidises to about five-sixths. In return for their ruble the children get a performance presented by actors and actresses who are their faithful friends. The principal players do not receive anything like the salaries paid to principals at the big Central Theatres; but the children's drama is a career that has an appeal and a demand of its own, and very few actors leave it, despite the temptation of higher salaries. Fame in this world is better than rubles, and the actress R. A. Ohitina of Leningrad, who can inspire the devotion of her audience in any part from a stage-cat to Marya in *Revizor*, is much more content than she would be if the Pushkin Theatre called her its greatest actress since Katarina Simeonova.

And that the Theatre for Children is not regarded as a hobby or a minor speciality of the theatrical profession is shown by its producers Pyzhova and Bibikov being entrusted with the training of a young 'national' group of theatre students from Kara-Kalpakia at the Lunacharsky State

Institute. Further, in 1936 a group of artists at the Leningrad Tyuz separated off and founded the 'New Young Spectators Theatre' under B. Zon, a pupil of Stanislavsky. So popular is this Theatre that though intended for the young, so many adults began attending it that their number had to be limited; and now only fifty are admitted to any one performance. Many of the actors have become film-stars in their spare time, though they do not desert the theatre, which has become affectionately known as the 'Moscow Art Theatre of Leningrad.'

If there is anything of special interest in the show, there will be an exhibition in the foyer to increase it. Otherwise during the intervals, the children gather there, and play games or sing and dance. There is a question board for the inquisitive, with frequent headaches thereafter for the producer. "Where is Flanders?" is easy. "How do they make the thunder?" is only a matter of correct description. "Why does the merchant's daughter sit at home? Doesn't she go out to work?" can be dealt with by a short personal talk. But when it comes to "Is the dog a dog with a person, or a person in a dog, or both?" issues are raised which go to the roots of theatre and metaphysics together.

The wishes of the audience are respected, too; they have to be—as in the grown-up London of Kean and Kemble. In 1937, at a production of Pushkin's unfinished poem *The Mermaid*, an ending was provided similar to that which Dargomizhsky used when he made an opera of it. The prince marries the mermaid's mother who had been mortal, but had drowned herself when the prince deserted her. The producer no doubt thought that this happy ending was suitable for a 'fairy-story.' But his audience thought differently. The prince had betrayed somebody he had been fond of. The social feelings of the audience were outraged. He must not be allowed to have the best of two worlds, but must suffer for his mean behaviour. The ending was changed.

As may be imagined, there are comments on any inadequacy of presentation, which respect nobody's feelings.

"The tree-trunk swayed when the squirrel ran up it." But all is taken in very good part, if with proper solemnity.

Children and young spectators often provide their own scenarios,<sup>1</sup> frequently in collaboration. Two thirteen-year-old boys, feeling they had not themselves the necessary technique, but wanting a production about Papanin's expedition on the ice-floe, made a *maquette* of the camp, to show what it should look like.

Many authors write chiefly for the young. Alexandra Brushtein is perhaps the most notable of them. Her two plays *Blue and Pink* and *Solo Fighter* have gladdened thousands, because in her hands children on the stage are given the importance during big events which children have, though usually unacknowledged. They are individuals, as adult in relation to their own problems as adults to theirs.

The scene of *Blue and Pink* is a high school of the old style, during the Revolution, in (I think) Leningrad. The windows are tightly shut and the door is bolted and secured so that no breath of what is going on outside shall reach the children—or the mistresses. But life bursts in, and the young heroine Zhenya goes out to meet it, her heart more than her mind aware of its truth. The Jewish girl, Bloom, is persecuted in trivial ways by the head-mistress and other grown-ups; but this in itself would not awaken Zhenya. It is the events outside that awaken her.

In Act I, for instance, some smart mounted police ride by, and all the girls are ecstatic about them. Bloom, for a disobedient curl, has been 'kept in.' Nobody thinks anything of this. But the clatter of hooves, the nervous tension of the staff, and other sounds and symptoms, create an atmosphere that will end by 'getting' everybody.

In the second act, it is noticed that the windows have been puttied up and the front doors bolted. The school porter naïvely tells Zhenya why. She doesn't yet fully understand the significance, but if queer things are going on outside, then

<sup>1</sup> The usual method in all Russian theatres is for the committee of management to pass a scenario submitted by an author, before the play is commissioned, though, of course, the scenario can be modified in detail as the writing requires.

there is all the more reason to tell Bloom's parents why their daughter, who is a day-boarder, will not be coming home at the usual time. She doesn't fear the dark walk, she knows perfectly well that strange people will be lurking in doorways; but she decides to go, nevertheless, getting out by a trick.

In the last act, mysterious events among the staff react on the girls. The atmosphere becomes tenser; and the world outside is revealed through the young minds inside. At the climax, Bloom on the top of a ladder at the window sees her own brothers shot by a firing-squad; and the play ends in general panic.

So convincing, so three-dimensional is the character of Zhenya that the audience is able to construct for itself her future as a revolutionary when she grows up—and this is a characteristic of Soviet art. The life of a stage-figure is not bounded by the stage performance. It goes on after it, in the reality of the world outside; and this foundation for great drama is greatly helped by the close relation between the stage-figures and the audience.

Alexandra Brushtein's next play was *Solo Fighter*. This describes the adventures of a little girl Panyushka during the Civil Wars. The Whites have captured a station and shot the President of the Com-Bed (Poor Peasants' Committee), who is her uncle. Left to fend for herself, she arrives at a school where an old woman, Annushka, has just started as head teacher. But there are no lessons. The Whites are advancing rapidly; and all the men go out to hold them up, leaving women and children to load and get sent off a trainful of bread confiscated from the Kulaks to be given to the starving masses in Moscow.

Panyushka gets on the telephone to the nearest depot and asks for a powerful locomotive to be sent. But before it arrives the Whites have broken through and occupied the village. Annushka remembers a big store of alcohol, and directs the Whites to it, and within a short while all of them are dead drunk. Annushka and the others leave, and the trainload of bread is duly sent off.

It is a more episodic play than *Blue and Pink*, but has more action and bustle.

Another writer who has made a name with children's plays is Eugène Schwartz, who has specialised in what may be called 'Soviet fairy-tales.' His first work in this direction was *Underwood*, produced at the Leningrad Tyuz in 1929. He gives his fancy an actual place. Thus one of his characters tells the way to another: "Take a number Nine, which stops in the wood near the Polytechnic; go straight on, till you reach the end of the park and then turn left." At the end of the twenties academic critics were for getting rid of the fairy-tale altogether, but Schwartz saved it by this technique, which he developed in *Treasure*, and carried to greater realms of fantasy in *Little Red Riding-hood*, both of which plays were done by the New Tyuz. Here he introduced Soviet characters into the classical fairy-story, not by way of propaganda, of course, but for greater actuality in the structure of the play. An analogy would be if an Indian dramatist adapted christening ceremonies, fairy or wicked god-mothers, etc., into terms of Hindoo custom, when dramatising the story of *Sleeping Beauty*. The base is more actual, and the fancy therefore freer. This is more or less what Schwartz did with Hans Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. Two more plays gave him greater and greater inspiration—a quality vitally needful for children's plays; and enabled him to write his best play, *The Shadow*, which was produced in 1940 by Akimov at the Leningrad Comedy Theatre.

This is the story of a young student who is spending a holiday in a southern country. He stays at an inn, in a room once occupied by Hans Andersen. (The 'actualistic' base.) The king of the country has died, and has left a clause in his will that as he has no heir, and all the kings in all the world are idiots, his only child must leave the court and settle incognito in the country, till she falls in love. And then whoever she falls in love with is to marry her and be king.

Of course the young student falls in love with the princess, not knowing who she is; and one evening, half-jokingly, tells his shadow to go and tell her.

His shadow slips away, but, once out of range, goes its own way. It cannot forgive him for the fact that all these years it has been just his shadow. Now that it has an independent existence, it lives for itself. It has a distinguished career, and marries the princess in the student's stead. The rest of the play shows the student's battle with this saboteur of a shadow and his ultimate victory.

Obviously this delicious little play is pure fairy-tale, but it also has an actual base in the fact as well as the spirit of Soviet life.

The Leningrad Theatre for Young Spectators was founded in 1924, giving the first play in which attention was paid to children as heroes. This was *Tom Sawyer*. B. V. Zon, who produced it, was himself very young. By 1938 there were 104 special theatres professionally trained and permanently equipped in different parts of the Union, including all the Transcaucasian Republics and all those of Central Asia except Tadjikstan. Naturally not all reached equal proficiency; but, oddly enough, it was not the remoter places which failed to give satisfaction, but such places as Sverdlovsk in the populous Urals and Harkov in the up-to-date Ukraine. In 1940 the Children's Theatres at Grozny in the oilfields of Daghestan and Novosibirsk in Western Siberia had each an actress of exceptional merit, who can play boys' parts and girls' with equal success.

Finally, among the special audiences there are what might be called the sub-national groups, of Jews and Gipsies. The Gipsies had no written literature until 1926, when Professor Sergiyevsky worked out an alphabet for them, based on Russian characters. In 1927 the first Gipsy magazine in the world, *Gipsy Dawn*, appeared, followed three years later by a monthly, *New Road*. In the meantime some Gipsy poets had organised a group of writers called The Gipsy Word, and out of this came the first Gipsy travelling theatre. Its performances were little more than songs, dances, and turns, animated.

In January 1931 a permanent Gipsy Theatre was opened in Moscow, on a small scale even for a Moscow theatre—

seating 438. The original actors mostly came from Gipsy choruses and bands in restaurants, who had a sort of flair for the 'theatrical.' Later they were joined by others from co-operatives in the towns and collective farms in the countryside—for in the U.S.S.R. even the Gipsies are adopting a more organised mode of living. Their training had to include a good deal of general 'education,' but even on the stage they had to be shown what to do. In consequence the first Director, M. Goldblatt, had to become autocratic in his methods. This was plain in their first play, *Life on Wheels*, by A. Germano, with music by Bugachevsky, who was assisting Goldblatt. It was feeble dramatically, but so full of colourful songs and dances (often less relevant to the plot than even the lyrics of an American musical comedy) and costumes, and so well produced, that its fame spread far beyond Moscow.

The same criticisms applied to subsequent plays, *Pharaoh's Tribe*, *Between Fires*, and *A Marriage in the Camp*. Their first real drama was in Prosper Merimée's *Carmen* and a play based on Pushkin's poem *The Gypsies*, produced by M. Yanshin, a pupil and actor of the Moscow Art Theatre. But the gifted hand of the producer was still maintaining a rigid formalism. *Carmen* was revised on more democratic lines, but the actors, so long accustomed to discipline, slackened for want of the technique to support themselves; and the last estate was worse than the first.

Then the ghost of the murdered Spanish poet, Garcia Lorca, came to their aid. The passion and virility, the hot folk-lore of Andalucia, gave them new life. Although the characters in *The Bloody Wedding* are nameless—'Father,' 'Mother,' 'Bride,' 'Woodcutter'—the people are real; and they were easily assumed and given life by the Gipsies. Only the hero, Leonardo, has a name, and true to his southern blood he knows no bonds, no obstacles, and no mercy. This was in 1939. The Gipsies, as such, played no part in the Russian Civil War; but their internal history of ferocity and feud gave them a quick feeling for the chaos of Franco's rebellion. Their theatre reflects a deeper realism toward the past of a foreign country than would be possible perhaps in

more united communities, such as, for example, the relics of the North American Indians.

The story of the Jewish Theatre is naturally very different. In Tsarist days there were one-man performances by wandering Jewish actors; and even a haphazard travelling Jewish Theatre, of a kind. But the tongue they spoke was called 'Cooks' language,' and their performances were subject to insulting interruptions and disorderly scenes which gave the local police excuses to turn the actors out of the town! The Jewish populations—which are widespread in parts of the U.S.S.R., especially in the west, where they were confined by the Tsars to areas of Western Ukraine and Byelorussia, and limited to trade and handicrafts for a livelihood—loved their theatre but could do little for it; and when they showed signs of doing so, commercial fingers were put in, spoiling the shows.

In 1919, two permanent Jewish Theatres were founded: at Petrograd and Moscow, the latter,<sup>1</sup> through the genius of the great Jewish actor and producer S. M. Mikhoels, having risen to a high place among the best theatres of the Union. For the first ten years it explored its own Russian-Jewish classics: Sholom-Aleikhem,<sup>2</sup> who wrote sympathetically of the one-man Jewish show in his novel *Shooting Stars*; Perets, and others. In a sense, it also revived the traditional popular theatre of Goldfaden. These plays for the most part glorified a previous way of life and a racial past, the heroes and problems of yesterday eclipsing the problems and heroes of today. But in 1929 they turned to contemporary themes and the past was set in its due perspective. The Civil Wars, the aims, methods, and difficulties of the Kolkhozes, the way the Jews were changing their financial genius into more productive forms—these became their new subjects.

<sup>1</sup> The Moscow State Jewish Theatre, often abbreviated to the Moscow Goset.

<sup>2</sup> 1859–1916. Chiefly a short-story writer. Son of an ex-rich man who had to become an innkeeper. Started writing in Hebrew, but later 'found' himself in Yiddish, which he has helped to elevate to a serious literary language. The pogroms in Kiev in 1905 drove him to America, but he later returned, suffering from tuberculosis, of which he died. A humorist and lover of the people, his lifelong enemy was plutocracy. (From Aaron Gurstein (Soviet Jewish critic), *International Literature*, 1939, No. 2, pp. 71–8.)

Sholom-Aleikhem's *Tevye the Milkman* is a good example. The locale of this is a backward pre-Revolutionary townlet. The 1905 Revolution has stirred it up. Tevye is a small Jewish roundsman with one cow and two daughters. One of the daughters refuses the rich husbands he can get for her, and goes off to join her revolutionary sweetheart, who has been sent to Siberia. The other falls in love with a Gentile—a Russian, and an artist at that! Tevye's world is breaking up, but he decides that his progressive daughters are right; and there is a strong scene in which he persuades his wife about this. He is evicted by Tsarist officials, but becomes friendly with the Ukrainian peasants and is able to show them that all their troubles are rooted in Tsarist oppression. The character of Tevye was one of Mikhoels' triumphs, as was his rendering of the title-rôle in Radlov's production of *King Lear* at the Moscow Goset, about which we shall be saying more when we come to Radlov himself. As far as the Goset is concerned, it was a production that marks a turning-point, in 1935, from stylisation to realism. It is still in the repertoire, and justly famous.

The Jewish Theatre, though losing nothing of its personality, was losing its cliquishness. It played Jules Romains's *M. Le Trouhadec*, Labiche, Russian Soviet plays, like Rakhmanov's *Turbulent Old Age* (an adaptation of the Soviet film *Baltic Deputy*, which shows the inter-relations of Bolsheviks and scholars). This enlarged field did not put the past out of focus; on the contrary, it brought the past into focus. We have the personal impression of a Jewish student who came up to the Moscow Aviation Institute<sup>1</sup> and went to the Jewish Theatre to see the heroic play *Bar-Kokhba*:

“There was I, leaning over the balcony, electrified, my eyes full of tears. I listened to the clash of swords coming to us across thousands of years. I saw the swords in the hands of my people, beautiful, virile, unyielding—loving, to its last gasp, freedom and fatherland. I wept for joy and pride. At last I was seeing my own people in all its simplicity. It is

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by V. Zuskin, ‘Twenty Years of the Moscow State Jewish Theatre’ (*Teatr*, 1939, No. 5, pp. 65–70).

unusual to see swords in Hebrew hands. As never before, I felt myself a Jew, a descendant of ardent Jewish patriots. . . . It symbolised our patriots also being descendants of them, found at last across two thousand years of our Soviet homeland."

The Moscow Goset, though a small building (it seats 766), has gathered round it some of the foremost names of the Soviet Theatre, especially in décor—Rabinovich, Nathan Altman (who did the settings for *Uriel Akosta* in early days and for the Habbima Theatre *Dybbuk* in 1922), Robert Falk, and Alexander Tysshler; in music—Pulver, Alexander Krein, and M. Milner; and in playwrights.

In the course of time it has developed a school, which has broken new ground by dramatising stories from Peretz (died 1915); and the 'annual performances' of this school in 1939 under C. Rolbaum and in 1940 under V. Zuskin were a great deal more than mere prize-giving-day displays: for example, the third of three one-act plays shows an old musician, who on his deathbed is taking leave of his sons—heirs to his talent and name. In his last song the whole renascent power of Jewish culture was said to be "felt like an assertion" (*Death of a Musician*).

The influence of this fine theatre has greatly encouraged Jewish drama in all parts of the Union. In the remote east, where the Rivers Bira and Bijan flow into the Amur River, in 1928 a Jewish agricultural colony was settled—not, it should not be necessary to add, with any of the previous connotations of sending the Jews 'to Siberia.' Seven thousand Jewish Kolkhoz workers settled here, but by no means only to work the land. A power-station, clothing mills, furniture factories, building-trade supplies, a saw-mill, a lime-works, they have these also. It is a complete Jewish cultural and economic world, with schools, newspapers, technical institutes—so complete, indeed, that in 1934 it received the status of the first 'Jewish Autonomous Province.' Naturally it has a Jewish Theatre. This is called after Lazar Kaganovich, who was the organiser of the colony, and also had an energising effect on Soviet railways both in Siberia and in Russia.

Although Birobijan is some 4,000 miles from Moscow, in

1934 the Moscow Goset organised a group to go and found a Jewish Theatre there. Some of the company were Jewish graduates from the Goset school; others were invited from the Jewish Theatres at Kiev, Minsk, and Odessa. Mikhoels took a personal interest in the scheme, and produced *An Evening of Sholom-Aleikhem* for them before they set out. M. Rubinstein was their first director, and his production of a translation of Slavin's *Intervention* is still in their repertoire.

For some years, however, they lacked a permanent guiding hand, like the Daghestan Theatre. Guest producers were invited from time to time to make the long journey from Moscow; but it was only when the Moscow Goset, for the good name of Jewish Theatre Art, arranged for Goldblatt to go there from the Gipsy Theatre that Birobijan produced first-class shows. Now, though Goldblatt has left them, they have young producers of their own, permanently, whose shows they take to distant frontier posts and collective farms, where they did specially valuable educational-dramatic work at the time of the R.S.F.S.R. and U.S.S.R. Soviet elections. In 1939 their most important current productions were Sholom-Aleikhem's *Wandering Stars* (produced by S. A. Margolin of the VTSPS and Mossovet Theatre); *The Banquet*, a verse play by Markish; and *The Ovadis Family*, a play which few Jewish Theatres except the Moscow one seem able fully to perform.<sup>1</sup> They now consider themselves, and very likely are, the leading theatre of the Far East.

In other places where there are large Jewish minorities, special Jewish Theatres have appeared: Byelorussia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, the Crimea. In the last there is a travelling Jewish Theatre for the Kolkhozes. These theatres have not all reached the same standard; that at Kiev, for example, had been suffering from a not uncommon complaint: the demand for a good theatre was outrunning the supply of gifted producers to maintain it; until the organising and creative abilities of Goldblatt were transferred here in 1940, and succeeded in stemming the feuds and quarrels that had been chaotic since the resignation of B. I. Vershilov. Gold-

<sup>1</sup> I. Belikov in an article in *Teatr*, 1940, No. 1, p. 70.

blatt produced *The Bewitched Tailor*—a comedy of Sholom-Aleikhem—in which he also played the lead.

This is a bitter but fascinating story of a practical joke played on a poor Jewish tailor. He decides to buy a goat, and spends his last penny on doing so at the nearest town. His own village is too far to reach in a single day, so he puts up for the night at an inn, where his precious she-goat is changed for a worthless male without his noticing it. On arriving home, he is much jeered at for his simplicity, and thinking (not without laughing at himself) that the goat-merchant and his talkative wife have cheated him, he goes back to the town, spending another night at the inn on the way, and telling everybody how he has been tricked. The people at the inn thereupon change the animals back; so that poor Shimen-Ele arrives in town with the same she-goat he had really bought. Puzzled, but still the common-sense peasant, as he thinks, he starts for home. At the same inn the same trick is played, and he reaches his house, for the second time, with a he-goat. The village now thinks he is possessed by some evil power, and this they show him in no uncertain manner, till no longer cheerful, but mystified, horrified, terrified, poor Shimen-Ele goes out of his mind.

In this play, as A. Borshchagovsky says,<sup>1</sup> Sholom-Aleikhem has shown the Chaplinesque ‘Little man,’ with his dreams of happiness which never come true, meeting his doom with a smile. A particularly moving little scene is that in which on Shimen-Ele’s return, milk-pails, cheese-jars, pots for sour cream, are brought out—with a quiet triumph and devotion—by the whole family and tailoring community, singing and dancing to the (quite useless) goat.

It is a play that particularly appeals to rural communities, but towns too enjoy it.

The mention of Jewish minorities, however, raises the question of minority-treatment, and as this applies particularly to the ‘Liberated Lands,’ and this chapter is already too long, we will best consider these new members of the Soviet Union in a chapter all their own.

<sup>1</sup> *Teatr*, 1940, No. 12, pp. 37-49.

## CHAPTER VII

### New Socialist Audiences

ON September 22, 1939, Soviet armies completed their occupation of those areas which had belonged to the Polish governing classes, but which contained large populations of Byelorussians and Ukrainians. The two areas were added to the Byelorussian and Ukrainian S.S. Republics respectively; and their citizens became automatically entitled to the usual benefits of 'national' Soviet citizenship. This, as explained above, includes a theatrical culture of their own, if there is any demand for one. Let us take Byelorussia first.

The new province of Western Byelorussia has as its chief town, Bialystok. By the end of the year the following had been established there: a Polish National Theatre (there had been none before), a Russian Theatre, a Jewish Theatre (with a Government grant of 300,000 rubles to reconstruct the old ' Palace Theatre '), and a Variety Theatre, with preparations for a Byelorussian Theatre almost complete. There was also a ' Jewish Miniature Theatre ' by then which visited Moscow later in the year with two programmes, *Humming and Dancing* and *Raisins and Almonds*. As their names imply, these were intimate hotch-potches, not unlike the old Arts League of Serviceshows: a bit of folk-lore, a dance, a song, a production number, a sketch, a ballad, all worked out on a theme and up to a finale, an offshoot of the People's Jewish Theatre of Abram Golfaden. All these new theatres at once took their place beside the older Byelorussian theatres, at Minsk, for example, or at Vitebsk, which that year had seen a new play by the local poet Glebko, *Above the River Banks*, which describes the Poles' occupation of Byelorussia. And most theatres in the Republic stage Krapiva's *He who Laughs Last*, which is a defence of the Soviets against their calumniators.

Something similar to the Jewish Miniature Theatre had

been known in Poland since the time when the people of that unhappy country replaced foreign overlords with their own—little better if no worse. In 1919 in Warsaw a miniature theatre began, full of hope that with the end of the Tsars other obstructions to liberalism were also ended. It was wrong. The new Polish Government suppressed it, not because it was revolutionary, but because it was progressive. In 1939 most of its original members were still alive, and these met in Lvov and reformed their miniature theatre. One of their sketches may be described here:

A Velasquez painting of an Infanta has been removed from the Prado Art Gallery during the early days of the Franco Rebellion, and is on show in a Paris Museum. She yearns for Madrid. She remembers two lads who had come to see her. One had cried "Death to the tyrants." She remembers how a little later he was brought into the Prado, for shelter, dying. But in the streets outside the people fought on. She remembers the sound of them singing the 'Internationale.' And in her exile she is comforted.

Lvov was always a centre of Ukrainian art. Even before 1914 the Besida Theatre there, under its gifted Ukrainian director Stadnyk, had achieved some measure of national culture despite the Tsars. In 1927 the Polish censorship, after interfering greatly with it, finally suppressed it altogether. Only travelling companies, under strict control, were to play, in rented halls. They might not go beyond the borders of Western Ukraine, and their movements inside them were restricted. Many of the Stadnyk company escaped to Soviet Ukraine, where a strong national theatre was evolving; and in 1939 these returned to Lvov, and were housed in the Grand City Theatre, previously used only for French comedies and farces in Polish.

Meanwhile the Polish Theatre there was trying valiantly to adapt itself to Soviet life. The first Soviet season saw a bourgeois problem play about Periclean Athens (*Xanthippe's Defence*) by the Polish writer Morstin, produced by a Pole, Wercinsky. It was rather trivial. Next came *The Morals of Pani Dulska*, by a Polish actress-authoress, Gabriela Zapolska.

This showed some sense of the events of the 1905 Revolution, but not very broadly. Its producer was Dombrowski, who had better success with translations of *Yegor Bulychov* and *Twelfth Night*, and was finding his feet when the German invasion began.

On the crest of that enthusiasm for life which the breaking of dams always sets free, all over Ukrainian 'Poland' in 1939 theatres were founded or enlarged and heartened. At Baranovichi the Poles had allowed a troupe of only five actors; now a full company was formed. At Tarnopol the local company reached the figure of seventy-four players. At Lvov not only Jewish, but Ukrainian and Polish theatres were opened, although the theatre at Smolensk crowned its rising reputation in 1940 with its rendering of *Marshal Suvorov* (see below, p. 128). Theatres in Ukrainian were opened at Lutsk and Stanislavov; a regional travelling theatre operated in the new lands of Colomea.

It was easier for the Ukrainians than for the Poles or Byelorussians. The Ukrainian Theatre has been for years one of the proudest in the Union. Producers and actors at Kiev, Harkov, and Odessa have held audiences spellbound since the entry of the Ukraine in 1922-3. The Ukrainian dramatist Alexander Korneichuk's plays are performed in many languages. As early as 1934 the Soviet critic P. A. Markov<sup>1</sup> could cite this area with Georgia and Uzbekistan as instances of the interesting developments in non-Russian nationalities.

But theatres, like schools and parliaments, empires and cultures, and all other groups of human beings with a corporate life of their own, rise and fall. In 1940 the theatre at Kiev had grown loose and romantic. When the Franko Theatre there performed Korneichuk's new play, *In the Steppes of Ukraine*, the scene-designer, M. Drak, set the 'good' progressive peasant's hut with climbing plants, grapes, and water melons, but the backward, recalcitrant peasant's as neglected, with a superstitious truss of maize over the door, thereby 'schematising' the co-operator and the saboteur

<sup>1</sup> *The Soviet Theatre* (London, 1934).

with a deliberate disregard for the truth. The producer, G. P. Yura, gave the crowd scenes a sort of operatic pictur-esque ness and missed the point of the play continually.

Nor does the Russian Theatre at Kiev seem to have escaped the local romanticism. Content that a good set should mean an atmospheric production, Yo. Ioffe produced Schiller's *Intrigue and Love* (a re-staging of this play, first produced here in 1933 under the formalist doctrine of 'revising the classics') in such a way that, according to one critic,<sup>1</sup> the meaning of the play was expressed better in the torture-chamber-like study of the President oppressive with pictures, busts, massive hangings, than in the clash of interests on the stage.

Nor is this looseness confined to Kiev. The critic S. Tsimbal, visiting Odessa in 1939, complains that at the Jewish Theatre there he was warned not to expect too much, because the play he was about to see was shortly to be taken off and given a new production; while at the Russian Dramatic Theatre there he was warned not to expect too much, because the company playing that night was mostly composed of novices. These apologies, as he rightly observes, ought to have been made to the audience—such an insulting attitude to the audience being contrary to Soviet practice, theory, and inclination. At the same time theatrical life in Odessa is, as it has been for years, strong, healthy, and varied. On the notice-boards before the German occupation were to be seen the following play-titles and authors: Gorky (no fewer than four plays), Lope de Vega, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, Ostrovsky's *Not a Farthing* and *GUILTY though GUILTYLESS*, Gogol's *Inspector-General* and *The Wedding*, Molière, Balzac, Schiller, Griboyedov, and the usual Goldoni, with several Jewish and Ukrainian playwrights. The Theatre of the Revolution was doing *Pavel Grekov*; the Jewish Theatre an adaptation of *Madame Bovary*.

At Dniepropetrovsk, until the German advance, there was a fine new theatre, with a big auditorium, lighting plant, stage appliances, and rehearsal-rooms as good as anything in the Union. But, judging from criticisms of a new play there

<sup>1</sup> A. Borshchagovsky, *Teatr*, 1940, No. 12, pp. 37-49.

(*My Son*), these amenities were not being properly used. This play is an extremely emotional one, about a middle-aged woman, who learns that her Communist son has returned from Buda-Pesth to his home country and been arrested. She hasn't seen him for twenty years, but if his real name is discovered, he is certain to be executed.

At Dniepropetrovsk all was melodramatic. The acting was rhetorical, and each player worked for his own effects. The mother was not a real person, with tremendous internal conflicts, but just a romantic figure of a heroic woman or a woman-heroine. The producer had no central idea—no perspective of humanity—and no control over his company. Indeed, it seems that where there are shortcomings in the Ukrainian Theatre, the reason lies, as elsewhere, as always, in the lack of a reasoning personality to study the charts and steer the boat.

On July 21, 1940, the peoples' ballots voted the young republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia into membership of the U.S.S.R. From the theatrical point of view the Soviet Union thus gained another strong national theatre and two rather weaker ones.

There has been an Estonian Theatre for two generations. As early as 1870 the poetess Lydia Koidula organised an amateur group, which developed throughout the countryside as a cultural influence. Four years later the Estonia Society founded a permanent professional theatre at Tallinn, followed by a similar foundation in 1895 at Tartu by a society called the Vanemuine. In 1906 this latter had become rich enough and confident enough to build a new theatre in Tartu for Karl Menning, who had been a pupil of Max Reinhardt in Vienna. Tallinn followed suit the same year with a theatre for the Estonian actors Pinna and Altermann. In 1911 the Tartu Theatre was strong enough to colonise. Menning's pupil Alexander Tetsov opened a repertory theatre in Parnu, and amateur semi-permanent undertakings sprang up everywhere. When such bodies gave their opening shows, by Tsarist law all speeches in Estonian were forbidden. Russian, on the other hand, the Estonians were determined not to

use. Often, indeed as a rule, these theatres were opened in dead silence.

Menning in Tartu produced progressive plays, such as those by Ibsen and Björnsen. The Estonia Theatre at Tallinn, where the producer was Lungholtz, did many of the world's classics, including *Hamlet*, with Altermann as the Prince. But though the influence on producers was largely that of Reinhardt, many of the actors had studied and trained at the Moscow Art Theatre, with good effect on the standard of Estonian acting.

At the independence of Estonia in 1918, the theatre started down the fashionable continental road of discontented experimentation. "The Morning Theatre" in Tallinn made a name by its expressionism in Kaiser and Hasenklever. Others did Dickens and Andreyev. Mass scenes were given predominance over the quiet character studies of the older generation. Lauter at the Estonia Theatre reached the end of this road in *The Machine Wreckers*. But little by little the deeper methods of the Moscow Art Theatre won their way back, as they were doing in Soviet Russia; and since Estonia joined the Union, reaction has reacted on itself and become Socialist Realism, in Shakespeare, Molière, Russian classics, and contemporary plays of the Soviet Union.

Latvia and Lithuania fared less well. In the latter there are now, since she entered the Union, several theatres; in the days of her 'independence' she had only two, and of meagre standard. Latvia's most famous play, *Fire and Night*, by the poet Rainis, is now available to all classes, where before only the urban middle classes could appreciate it. More startling is the change in those parts of Rumania that have recently been liberated. In North Bukovina, for example, the city of Czernovitzi, which has a mixed Ukrainian and Jewish population, went formerly with only one theatre—and that a Rumanian one. Even the Russian Theatre had been shut down, and one of its most famous actors had to earn his living as a waiter in a hotel. The Ukrainian language and literature were stifled and pride in the national past discouraged. As soon as the Rumanian yoke was removed, however, a

Ukrainian State Theatre was established at Czernovitzi, and plans made to open a Jewish Dramatic and a Russian Musical Comedy Theatre as soon as possible.

At Kishinev, in Bessarabia, a Moldavian Musical and Dramatic Theatre and a Russian Dramatic Theatre were started, and this town was made the headquarters of the Jewish and Ukrainian travelling theatres.

From all these rather dry details it must now be plain that the policy of the Soviet Union is to encourage the national and local spirits of minorities by theatrical means whenever there is even the smallest hope of doing so; and that the success of this policy depends—as all theatre ventures must do—partly upon the personality of the directors, but mostly on the theatrical ‘condition’ of the audience. It is time now to turn to the Central Theatres of Moscow and Leningrad and see what has been happening there.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Central Theatres : Left-wing

FOR examination it is easiest to place the Central Theatres in four groups: those names which survive from their formalist period, but with a very much changed style; those familiar old friends who have always been outwardly more realistic and have found ‘Socialist Realism’ a change more of content than style; new theatres, or theatres which have developed considerably in the last few years; and lastly, the three leading figures of the ‘New Men.’

A better perspective will be ours if we stand back in line a little beside Lunacharsky—Lenin’s friend, a man of culture and taste in every art from opera to sculpture, and poetry to music, himself as able an administrator of education as a writer of plays. It is due to him if to any one man that an almost Scottish hunger for education has become second nature to every Soviet citizen.

As early as 1925, in a report<sup>1</sup> made in November 1925 in the Leningrad State Academic Theatre of Drama (formerly the Alexandrinsky, now the Pushkin Theatre) he had described people being puzzled at finding “the methods of Tairov in the Moscow Art Theatre, and the methods of the Maly in Tairov’s Theatre,” and explained that it was hoped that all these different threads would in fact be woven into a ‘superb damask cloth.’ Some of the threads rot out; in them the decay of the old bourgeoisie is seen; we throw them aside; but others we bring to a better state of soundness, and the whole becomes sound. It was not a case of being present like barbarians at the break-up of the Roman Empire. That would be “just picking at the earth with an old peasant’s hand-plough.” This was not the case. They were building straight away on what had already been built up as far as they stood.

<sup>1</sup> Lunacharsky, Статьи, etc., p. 45.

Yet the pace could not be forced. "All this theatrical world had to be carefully watched and discreetly guided," he had written in August of the same year,<sup>1</sup> "towards the values of our own day; for in the realm of art nothing should be done by any sort of surgical act or fiat."

Accordingly, the theatrical hangovers from the bored bourgeois world were allowed to go on—the acrobatics of Meierhold and aesthetics of Tairov, which, as Lunacharsky continually pointed out, were not the revolutionary methods they seemed but an attempt to revive the flickering interest of the middle classes in the theatre by borrowing theatrical idioms from all over history. But their shortcomings were made plain by Lunacharsky. Tairov's was a theatre of outsides only. Its success was two-edged. If it was a good thing that a Soviet Theatre should excite the admiration of progressive sections of the middle-class world outside, there was also always a danger that it would be led astray into catering more for the remnants of the middle classes inside the Union, with whom it had closer ties than with the workers.

Lunacharsky's warning was taken. The political purges which mystified an uninformed world outside were paralleled with theatrical deterrings. Tairov, as a man, had been folding in upon himself for years. "Tairov seems to have become bored," wrote Norris Houghton,<sup>2</sup> describing the rehearsals of *Egyptian Nights* (1934). Naturally enough; one does tend to become bored with oneself in the middle of a great surge of life that does not greatly touch one. And Tairov had never intended to deal in surges of life. His Kamerny Theatre was founded in 1914, for the delectation of highbrows, in reaction to the Moscow Art Theatre, which had ceased to appeal to them. 'Kamerny Theatre' means 'Chamber Theatre' and the name subsists with the policy, though its seating capacity of 1,210 makes it bigger than the Maly, the Moscow Art Theatre, or the Vakhtangov. (That is its present size. It was rebuilt in 1930.)

<sup>1</sup> In Комсомольская Правда, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Moscow Rehearsals* (London edition, 1938), p. 141.

Tairov sided with the Revolution because he hoped it would increase the number of highbrows. His theatre was a haven of rest from struggle—struggle sublimated into an aesthetic sentimentality. His productions never touched the masses nor expressed the life of the masses. His first attempt at ‘realism’ came as late as 1932: Pervomaisky’s *Unknown Soldiers*; but that was crude dramatic material. Occasionally he produced contemporary plays with a Revolutionary content, like Vishnevsky’s *Optimistic Tragedy* (1934), which had greater success by reason of such content. But the heroism of the woman commissar in that production was the outward heroism of a newspaper headline, a Wagnerian heroism, Racine’s monumental *Phèdre* in a modern uniform, set as a pinpoint against plastic masses of supers on Ryndin’s gleaming set, which was alternately an architectural battleship and an impressionist battlefield. There was beauty in it, and a high technique, and heroism—a blah, bloated heroism—but no life of the individual, no humanity. When Tairov approached life, it turned allegorical in his fingers; and that is not the attitude of a great revolutionary, nor of a great artist. It is the attitude of a man who puts ideas before sympathy, an attitude all too common among minor producers and minor poets who lead the middle-class arts in other countries.

Consequently, this theatre was welcomed in other countries more warmly than in its own. In 1923, despite sabotage by Russian émigrés in Berlin, and interference by the police and embryo Fascists in Munich, its first tour of Germany was a success. So was the 1925 German tour; so were the performances at the Magdeburg Exhibition in 1926. The third foreign tour four years later was even more triumphant, and much more protracted: Italy, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil—though in the last named, promises and interest failed.

Tairov published some press-cuttings from foreign papers, in his book *Камерный театр*,<sup>1</sup> apparently trying to advertise his export value. But, as may be concluded from the above

<sup>1</sup> Moscow, 1934.

account, he did not on these tours 'represent' the Soviet arts at all. He was merely an exotic extension to the middle-class arts of countries visited. His foyer may be hung with medallions and diplomas and other tributes from abroad. That is no evidence of his value to the Soviet community. And it is not surprising that he was politically suspect in times of trouble. Nor is it surprising that his public, and his company, dwindled—not from fear of any Gestapo, but from lack of content in his work.

So Tairov's theatre, depleted of actors, and his ballet-cum-acrobatic training-school, and all that was his, were taken away from him, and put in the control of a committee, under whom Tairov worked until he should be restored to the full possession and use of his faculties. This, since Tairov is a gifted man, and in spite of his preconceptions a skilful man of the theatre, did in fact soon occur—and genuinely. In 1939 we find him producing a realistic play about a Soviet scientist searching for a method of defeating the 'Black Plague'—all the more earnestly in that a cynical Fascist colleague in Europe had declared bacteriological warfare to be imminent. The scientist is a woman, played by Alice Koonen, Tairov's wife. She tests her new virus on herself; suffers terrible things, but recovers. It is a play of suspense, and not very organic dramaturgically. There is a spice of the old Kamerny Theatre even in the heroic title *Stronger than Death*.

In the production, emphasis is no longer on human plastics or the pleasures of the eye and ear, but on the acting. Photographs of the Garden Scene, for example, tell us nothing of the play. There is a real wooden railing, 'real' flowering shrubs, curtains that hang outside lit French windows on a kind of verandah; a small table with a table-cloth; a deck-chair for Marina Strakhova to rest in. Perhaps it is all a little amateurish, as it will be if an artist, comfortable in one style, goes a little too far into the weaknesses of the opposite style; if, in short, the style is not wholly the creation of the man.

In 1938 Tairov is determined, however, to persevere in his

new way. He announces a play called *Consul-General*; a new play by Vishnevsky about the First Cavalry Army; a new production of Lermontov's *Spaniards*, a first stage version of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which Alice Koonen has prepared, and which she will help her husband to produce. Tairov is a loyal man. He is faithful to old friends. He proposes to bring back Mayakovsky, and defends against detractors that weird play *The Bug*. There is a certain humour in reading, from Tairov's pen, that Mayakovsky was mocking at the typical 'line' taken by the middle class. But of course this is true. The dream of the machine-world from Scene 5 onward is a middle-class dream—or nightmare—of the world in 1970. One female character, for example, says she remembers about 'roses' from old books on 'gardening'; and an old Professor says of 'love' that "From love we must make bridges and rear children." The replacing of the individual brain and vote by radio apparatus, too, is a sneer characteristic of the opponents of Socialism even in the Russia of 1920, against whom Mayakovsky exhausted himself with fighting. Tairov adds that witty lines like "He isn't wearing his tie—his tie's wearing him" and "He doesn't think—for fear of losing his head," are an exposé of the tendency for man to become a slave to things; but that is a capitalist tendency, not a Socialist one.

Yet in explaining<sup>1</sup> that *The Bug* is more than a mere struggle against middle class and bureaucracy (such as is the favourite charge among literary critics who scorn the work), in protesting that it has value today in the fight against those who 'vulgarise' Socialism and would like a communism on their own lines, to their own interest, Tairov is right. How right he is has been proved in a practical way by the full houses drawn by this play when Tairov toured the Red Army and Navy outposts in the Far East in 1939.

Such a drama, with its curious sets, a mechanical conference hall, robots, symbolic cage, and so on, is obviously well within the scope of the old Kamerny Theatre, even if a fuller content has been discovered. And Tairov has been thinking

<sup>1</sup> *Teatr*, 1940, No. 12, p. 60.



*"Where is the other bracelet?"*

The Masked Ball begins to work on the suspicions of Arbenin (played by Yuryev, star actor of Leningrad). Meierhold's lighting picks out the innocent white arm of Arbenin's wife in Lermontov's *Masquerade*.



“All Power to the Soviets!” Socialist Realism shows history in the making. A production of Pogodin's *The Man with the Gun* at Leningrad.

and studying. His remarkable development was first appreciated when *Madame Bovary* came to Moscow. Its success was almost as sensational as that of *Anna Karenina* at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1937; and critics were still writing about it in 1941. "A deepened psychological realism in Alice Koonen's acting, a psychological realism in the production, have prevailed over the deliberate 'convention' that was characteristic of the Kamerny in the past" is a typical comment.<sup>1</sup> And on his return from the Far East tour he admitted that his theatre has benefited from direct contact with the armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, once more the craft of the actor comes into its own. The actor, as Stanislavsky's aim was to make him, creates a figure that springs into the audience's consciousness as "a realistic, full-blooded, organic figure," and all his physical and psychological equipment is to be used to this end. This is as far a cry from the plasticity of the old Tairov as it is from Meierhold's dictatorial methods and dogmatic assertion of the producer as the sole creator of a stage-production. For obviously if it is the individual life in communism that you seek to express, it is the individual stage-life of the actor that must express it for you. You cannot give puppets individual lives; there is death in their painted faces, however lively their expressions; since Life, on the stage, is an intelligent response to a cue.

Meierhold, being more intransigent than Tairov in his treatment of actors, has fared worse. A superb actor himself, he eliminated all symptoms of life-like creation in the rest of his company as ruthlessly as any Shakespearean ham in Britain—not that his own star should shine more brightly through the clouding of others, but that there should be no stars at all in the firmament he, Meierhold, had created. It was the attitude, in a certain degree, of Komisarjevsky, who claimed for his curious dream-like scrolls and screens in *Macbeth* at Stratford in 1933 that "they assisted the spectators to re-create in their minds the creative work of my irrational

<sup>1</sup> N. Eigenholtz in *Teatr*, 1941, No. 2, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *International Literature*, 1940, No. 1, p. 120.

self.”<sup>1</sup> It was the attitude of Michael Chekhov, who, Lunacharsky tells us,<sup>2</sup> when refused a special ‘Michael Chekhov Theatre’ in which to do nothing but the classics, deserted to foreign countries, like Komisarjevsky before him.

It was the attitude of several Russian producers, too vain, or too afraid of their actors, or too discontented. But Meierhold was none of these things. His theories came from conviction, his conviction from thought. Bio-mechanics, demanding the spiritual elimination of the personal life, and the acrobatic subjugation of the body to scientific behaviouristic laws, Meierhold felt to be the theatre’s contribution to the Revolution. So they were. Meierhold was a Revolutionary. But he did not understand Socialism.

Himself the most promising of the pupils of the Moscow Art Theatre, he broke away from it as non-revolutionary, old-fashioned, out of touch with the times. As indeed it was. His way would magnify the theatre on a mass scale. The antithesis of Tairov’s ‘chamber’ music, it wanted colossal orchestral effects, with massed bands, tom-toms, cinema organs, and calliopes all at once. Proletarian rule, he thought, meant proletarian life; which meant proletarian entertainment; so he gave a Pavlovian *rationale* to the circus and called it the Soviet Theatre.<sup>3</sup>

But proletarian life had outstripped him, into regions of human dignity and endeavour—where there are hearts as well as muscles, and heads as well as hearts. Not the softened hearts of the pre-Revolutionary middle-class, nor the addled heads of the pre-Revolutionary workers and peasants, but a new people altogether, living a different kind of life, and different kinds of lives—Socialist individuals. If Tairov’s plastic man never existed, neither did Meierhold’s bio-mechanical man. Meierhold was now the non-Revolutionary, old-fashioned, out of touch with the times. So he lost caste, and company, and audience, and in due course theatre

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Komisarjevsky, *The Theatre*, London, 1935, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Статьи, p. 68 („Театр и Драматургия“ 1933, No. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Note that Sverdlin, who had similar ideas about the creation of an Uzbek popular theatre from Uzbek popular entertainment, had been a pupil of Meierhold. See p. 41.

too. In 1937 I was taken over the huge new building he was soon to occupy. It was shaped like a stadium turning into the form of the gear-chain-case on a lady's bicycle; with two huge revolving stages in the arena, and entrances from which nothing less than gladiators could be expected to issue. What has happened to that building now? I am told it is finished and used as a Theatre for Young Spectators—an elephantine Tyuz!

For Meierhold is still alive and active; but he is a changing man. It was harder for him to revise his convictions than for the more passive, more whimsical, more flighty Tairov. But he is revising himself. So much so that at the end of 1938 (when some unfriendly voices abroad were spreading the rumour that he was starving, or alternatively was in prison) he was invited to produce Lermontov's *Masquerade* at the Pushkin Theatre in Leningrad. It was his third production of this masterpiece of sophisticated sarcasm.

The first was in February 1917, in that same theatre, then called the Alexandrinsky—the swan-song, almost literally, of old Petersburg, a sort of choral production in advanced 'World of Art' way; "useless beauty," said one critic; "pointless beauty," said another. It was perhaps all these things, by all accounts—beautiful, lofty, and frigid. When Meierhold produced it a second time, it was in his 'Newest World' period, harsh, anti-beautiful, satirising the old world and its stately but savage ways. But now a mature man, contemplative, was to come to the play; from a new angle—a historical angle.

In 1917, all the emphasis was laid on *The Unknown*, a mystical figure, a sort of semi-supernatural Iago, in whose demoniacal hands Arbenin, the hero, is a puppet; and the rest were abstractions, almost symbolic figures.

Now, Lermontov, though his short life (1814–1841) was Byronic, was no mystic. He was an earthly figure, with a keen observation of what was happening to humanity, and a passionate hatred of political oppression. *Spaniards*, his first full-length tragedy, is openly a political work, supporting class and national equality, denouncing religious prejudice and

despotism. For that reason, like much of his work, it was suppressed by the nineteenth-century Tsarist officials. Meierhold himself has written in an article on Russian playwrights<sup>1</sup>: “*Masquerade* . . . aims before all else at creating a theatre of actuality. In the world of his dramas, saturated with demonism, Lermontov in scenes that rolled by rapidly one after another revealed the tragedy of people . . . madly bewildered by love.”

Accordingly in the 1938 production, Meierhold makes young Arbenin the central figure, with the Unknown as a sort of projection of events, and his infamous friend Zvezdich a human accessory. A huge doorway, in a gilt and crimson set which extends into the auditorium, sweeps the whole audience into old Petersburg and dominates scene after scene, undraped or altered in any way. Between this and the audience a curved staircase leads down into the orchestra pit. Behind the doorway Golovin, the scene designer, has set half-curtains and back-drops economically indicating locale—a black-and-red curtain with card-and-domino design for the gaming scenes, slit open for the masked ball itself; a white, pink, and green one for the scene during the ball; muslin and lace for Nina’s bedroom; black muslin (mourning) for the finale. In the 1917 production, this same Golovin had designed symmetrical but crowded sets, be-bobbled curtains, jointed screens, tables in skirts, and Pushkin-period chairs, everything elaborately calculated and balanced, with very little space to act in. For the 1938 production, he was much more laconic: an old piano and flowers for the Baroness’s salon, a writing-desk for Arbenin’s study, a clavecin and sofas for the ball, Nina’s bed with a lace canopy. Here is a certain tendency to symbolism, which would be saved by intense and realistic acting—a kind of cinema-studio technique, with the operators out of sight. This is nothing odd. It has been often used in repertory theatres, Soviet or other, where scene-changing is difficult or unnecessary.

Arbenin and Zvezdich are standing on the fore-stage. Out of the orchestra pit, as if from the very bottom of their

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Ya. Varshavsky, *Teatr*, 1939, No. 5, p. 89.

minds, comes a beautiful woman, superbly dressed, masked, up the curved staircase. She describes her smooth circle round them, and passes out of sight. Here is a certain dramatic-aesthetic tendency—a relic of the old theories of making scenery alive for its own sake. But the scene is saved from sensationalism, because of the woman's importance to the lives of the two men—the allure of the dance, the hot-house perfume of intrigue, the burning individual flames.

Arbenin, believing in Nina's innocence, is saying good night. He bends to kiss her hands, but stops suddenly, seeing the bracelet is missing. For him at this moment the centre of the world is those white hands. They part and hang in the air, like wings, catching a white light. Tortured with jealousy he sobs, stealing a look at them, not daring to look at them. The light is caught by the many mirrors on the gilt fretwork of the great doorway, which twinkle evilly, like the whole society of the time, through scene after scene.

This cinema-method is immensely enriched by the human feeling Meierhold has now acquired. But by all accounts he cannot get his actors to express it. The Pushkin Theatre company seems not to have followed him. This may be the company's fault. Certainly their standard of acting in the play I saw there in 1937 (*Peter the First*) was by no means consistently high. Or it may be that Meierhold's ideas are still too schematic, still too dehumanised, to allow full expression. It may be that he can never express even the ways of the old world in terms of the new, because he has never belonged to either world. Perhaps he has never expressed, and now never will express, anything outside Vsevolod Meierhold.

Of a younger and more realistic generation, but still with a name for 'experimental' productions, is Nikolay Ohlopkov, a young Siberian who began his career as producer doing shows in his native town, but later studied under Meierhold. He soon had a theatre of his own in the Krasnaya Pressnya district of Moscow, where he made many efforts to mix the audience more thoroughly into the experience of the play than was being done in the orthodox theatre. Sometimes he

placed the stage all round the audience, sometimes portions of it over their heads, sometimes in the centre of them, and once even made the whole auditorium a great stage in which players and spectators were scarcely distinguishable, in appearance or experience. Nobody who has read the vivid narrative of Norris Houghton about this last production, *The Iron Flood*, will question the rights of Ohlопков to call that building the Realistic Theatre.

For myself, in the course of a broadcast talk in 1938,<sup>1</sup> I called it the Flexible Theatre, partly because of this peripatetic stage, partly because his method enabled him to cover all kinds of drama, from Shakespeare to a play by a Soviet airman about Soviet airmen. But his best successes were with Soviet plays, particularly Pogodin's *Aristocrats*, a production which when I met him in 1937 he was modestly surprised to hear had made him virtually world-famous. He was inclined to decry Meierhold as too intellectual, and confessed to an affectionate admiration for the Moscow Art Theatre. This surprised me at the time, as it should not have done, for Ohlопков never was a formalist. When his productions were 'queer,' it was as the outcome of a logical process based, not on theory, like Meierhold's, but on a study of the individuality of the play in question, and reflection about the best way to communicate it to the audience. Ohlопков was, and is, a realist.

However, these experiments were possible only on a small scale. The Realistic Theatre was a small building and Ohlопков was unable to obtain a larger one. His audience also was limited, and his *Othello* even had several empty seats—a rare thing in a Russian theatre and a symptom of a minority appeal. So, while homage must be paid to Ohlопков's talents, it was no surprise to hear that his theatre had closed in 1937. The surprise was that he had been appointed as a kind of half-brother to Tairov at the Kamerny, alternating productions with him. How two artists so utterly different, the one middle-class, middle-aged, and a formalist hitherto at any rate, and the other of peasant origin, still under

<sup>1</sup> Published in *The Listener*, January 19, 1938.

forty and with a very realistic outlook, could maintain a consistent policy such as is expected of a Russian theatre far more than even a provincial repertory in Britain, nobody could understand: nor is much news available about the success of the partnership, which appears to have been by now dissolved.

Yet it seems that Ohlopkov's work has not gone unnoticed. The magazine *Teatr*, summing up, in December 1940, some results of the year, asked the question: "Why has so original and daring a régisseur as N. Ohlopkov no theatre of his own? . . . Has he really no right to 'his own' theatre, to a theatre with the kind of management that is in him—a theatre of grand, heroic sonorousness, on a big scale, a theatre of mass-action?" It was in April 1940 that Ohlopkov showed his abilities in a bigger theatre, the Vahtangov, where he produced Solovyov's new play *Field-Marshall Kutuzov*. This was a Napoleonic war play, like *Marshal Suvorov*, and showed the pitiful plight of the Russian peasant, who knew that nothing could release him from his own oppressors, but had to fight for his life to save his country. Up to the dress rehearsal, following the prevailing fashion for calling historical plays after anything rather than their heroes, it had been called *A.D. 1812*.

There is no doubt that Ohlopkov has a big future in the Soviet Theatre. At his age, by Russian standards, he is only just becoming used to his tools. There is a Russian Theatre joke about the first thirty-five years being the hardest, but after forty years you begin to feel at home in the theatre. That so influential a journal should be asking public questions about him is a sign that notice may be taken. But it is useless to prophesy, and in the absence of more information we must turn to theatres of a more ordinary kind, still on this left wing, and still with a flair for the abstract.<sup>1</sup>

The Moscow Trades Unions Theatre (MOSPS) was founded in 1923, in the third year of the New Economic Policy, with the object of encouraging Soviet playwrights on

<sup>1</sup> Since the above was written, it has been learnt that Ohlopkov is now on the permanent staff of the Vahtangov Theatre as a producer.

political themes. It was the first theatre to have a council for artistic and political policy, and the first to organise cheap admission for collectives. Its capacity is 1,300 seats. Now it has been reorganised under the title of the Mossovet Theatre (Theatre of the Moscow Council). It is not the place it was in the grand old fighting days, when the dramatist Bill-Belotserkovsky gave it of his best, especially his masterpiece *Hurricane* "written in his heart's blood,"<sup>1</sup> when MOSPS was first on the spot with topical plays for the anniversaries of the Red Army or the Paris Commune. It has twice changed. First it lost sight of matter in questions of form; and tended to formalise itself into clichés of production. Then, accepting the realistic method, it became unduly conceited. It calls itself 'The forerunner of Soviet Drama,' but it has outrun the main body so far that it has not only lost its way, it has lost touch with events.

A certain amount of sarcasm was levelled at it in 1941 because the forerunner of Soviet Drama announced nothing but foreign plays in its forthcoming productions—a stricture levelled at several prominent Central Theatres, but this we shall be discussing later. But it went its customary way notwithstanding, touring in the summer of 1941 the ill-fated Donets Basin and Odessa, just as it had toured the Far East the year before.

The Mossovet Theatre has a hankering after the 'Theatre Theatrical.' It tries to be elevating, and according to Kruti achieves a kind of "soothing syrup, to bring back youth to the old of the old-fashioned theatre." Of its three new productions in 1941, Zavadsky produced one, Goldoni's *La Locandiera*, and then bolted to Rostov-on-Don. *The Liar*, also by Goldoni, was produced by Samuil Margolin, and "that properly forgotten work of Ostrovsky, *Poor Brides*," was 'worked out' by V. F. Fyedorov.

Aiming at the Theatre Theatrical, Margolin with this 'comedy of manners' out-Playfaired the Lyric, Hammersmith. The sets were cluttered with bridges, balconies, draperies, and screens; the action was interrupted with songs

<sup>1</sup> I. Kruti, *Teatr*, 1941, No. 1, p. 33.

and pointless, if merry, interludes; the costumes and masks were so carefully thought out that the characters were stifled inside them. In short, Margolin was preoccupied—like several other romantic producers who have not understood Socialist Realism, especially toward the past—with correctly reproducing the life of the author's time, to such an extent that he quite overlooked the life of the author's characters. For Goldoni's value is to be measured by the extent to which he differed from, in humanising and making real, what had been up to his time a mere theatre of masks. Otherwise we should all be producing Shakespeare in the style of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*.

Fyedorov made a similar mistake with *Poor Brides*. To get the 'life and times' of Ostrovsky's emancipationist tract, he clutters up not the set with pieces, but the actors with things. Never was a heroine so burdened with props as Valentina with scarf, cigarettes, candle, and the little doll. But these are just walking categories; the actors are not inside characters; and not even the decorative genius of Ryndin can save the production from utter dullness. A theatre of types has no place in Soviet times.

So much for the 'conventional' theatre. Let us now turn to some old friends in Moscow and Leningrad and see what they have been doing since the inauguration of 'Socialist Realism.'

## CHAPTER IX

# The Central Theatres : Old Friends and New Developments

THE Maly Theatre ('maly' means 'little,' as opposed to 'bolshoy,' which means 'grand') was founded in 1824.<sup>1</sup> Gogol gave it spirit, and Shchepkin the actor gave it body; for its day it was sensationaly realistic, for Shchepkin had been a serf, and knew what counted in the lives of people other than officials. Perhaps also the fame of Garrick was still percolating through Germany toward the East. Then came Mochalov, the Russian Kean; and he gave it style, a declamatory style, which perched oddly on the realistic plinth, but has remained there ever since. The Maly is a traditional theatre, and proud of it. An actor called Prov Sadovsky joined the company in 1839; his son Mikhail and Olga his wife remained in the company after him; his grandson Prov is still in the company. One family one hundred years on the same stage! It is a theatrical record. Nor is it without significance that one of its leading actors is studying to play King Lear at the age of seventy. Ostuzhev started with no voice and stiff gestures, but the will to be an actor. He trained himself in the Maly tradition to speak, and achieved gestures that thrilled people of taste as the flick of a wrist in the right moment thrills knowledgeable spectators of Japanese 'Noh.' The fact that he has been stone deaf since middle age affects neither his refusal to retire nor his reputation. The fact that the Maly has been directed for the past five years or so by a man of the name of Hohlov may mean very little to the history of the Soviet Theatre in those years. Yet the Maly itself has a prestige as monumental as its productions.

<sup>1</sup> It opened its doors on the site of a house belonging to a merchant called Vargin on October 14, 1824; but the company had been in existence since 1806.

Ostrovsky is as inseparable from the Maly as Chehov from the Moscow Art Theatre. Lenin approved of it. It is Stalin's favourite theatre. Yet to analyse or explain its importance at the present day is not easy. Of recent years it has initiated no style, few outstanding plays, no supreme actor. Compared with Pogodin or Vishnevsky, its original plays have been scarcely socialistic and not at all famous. Of recent years it has revived *Othello*, Griboyedov's *Wit Works Woe*, *Peter the First*, *King Lear*, and *Uriel Akosta*. It has done an adaptation of Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*—not a very stageable novel, and although the stuffy provincial atmosphere was easy for the theatre of Ostrovsky, the chief part of Grandet père seems to have been too standardised to carry conviction. It has ventured blithesomely upon Benevente's frothy comedy *Los Intereses Creados*, or rather upon a *jeu d'esprit* under the same name 'translated' into light verse by Galperin, with additional scenes and characters. *On the Banks of the Neva* (1937) was a play by Trenyev which has hardly carried much weight since its first production. Leonov's *Sandukov's Flight* has had a similar fate.

Alone of the major theatres, the Maly retains its drop-curtain, where others have long changed to tabs that ripple away from the centre; and when the Maly drop goes up, you would never be surprised to find that there were candelabra lighting the painted wings, and your neighbours in the stalls wore bushy whiskers and kid gloves.

Yet what would the Moscow theatrical world be without the Maly? It would be like the West End of London if there had been no Galsworthy. For slowly, but inevitably, the Maly does move with the times. It had always been a theatre for the petty bourgeoisie rather than the nobles, and when the masses invaded it, in 1918, it had little but its prestige to offer them. *Lyubov Yarovaya* was its first successful contact with the new world, and that did not appear till 1925. Yet like the tortoise, it gets there in the end; and often it beats the hare, as we have already seen in the matter of religion in historical plays (see p. 15). It has its eyes well open, and has a fine taste for an *altitudo*. *Uriel Akosta* showed

that. A failure in 1925, because the Revolutionary ferment still had need of the anti-religious museums, the Maly nevertheless believed in Gutzkov's poetic masterpiece, and gave powerful effect to it. But then Sudakov was its producer, and Rabinovich with all the scholarship of Hebrew tradition behind his colours designed the sets, and the music of Lev Pulver boomed in grand sympathy. The plutocrat of Amsterdam talking to his pictures and statues; idle wandering in a lovely park; Rembrandt—or Garrick—lighting; the hot, fanatic, sensuous power of the Synagogue—a great dignity to the Soviet stage, the lack of which in other theatres has had to be brazened out by alternative theories. Not a particularly large theatre, seating nearly 1,050, it is a place that cannot be ignored in any account of the Soviet Theatre.

At the moment it is evacuated to Chelyabinsk, and working on a version of Tolstoy's immense *War and Peace* under the title of *The Year 1812*, in emulation of the Art Theatre's *Anna Karenina*.

For their production of a play by Korneichuk in 1941, *In the Steppes of Ukraine*, four workers of the Maly Theatre recently won Stalin Awards of 50,000 rubles each: People's Artist Sudakov, the Maly's chief producer, People's Artist Svetlovidov, Merited Actor Zrazhevsky, and Ilyinsky, whom I take to be an actor who has joined the Maly Theatre within the last few years.<sup>1</sup> A picturesque wartime story is given by Alexander Werth,<sup>2</sup> who saw an old set for Ostrovsky's *Forest* used as external camouflage in Moscow before the theatre was evacuated.

The Alexandrinsky Theatre at St. Petersburg was founded in the same year as the Maly at Moscow; but it had no Gogol and no Ostrovsky. Also the court life of St. Petersburg was more aristocratically class-conscious and limited than the mercantile and middle-class life of Moscow. Karyatgin was no serf. That is not to say that the Court itself was overfond of the 'new' theatre. It preferred operas and German plays.

<sup>1</sup> Either Boris Ilyinsky, from the Vahtangov; or more probably Igor Ilyinsky, one of Meierhold's former company.

<sup>2</sup> *Moscow '41* (London, 1942), p. 104.

But the populace in their stately playhouse were affected by the nearness of tsars and princes, as the villagers of Sandringham in Edwardian times modified their Norfolk ways.

It has gathered momentum, but not tradition. The very absence of a lead made the Alexandrinsky policy. Its tradition is a wandering realism. It is interesting to note that Meierhold's early experiments (from 1910 on) were made in this building. His first overtures were to Society, not Socialism. When that Society disappeared and the theatre signalled their going by removing the word 'Alexandrinsky' from its title, it had no audience and no policy. Even christening it the Pushkin Theatre gave it no special direction. It was, and is, a fine old theatre with all the sentimental advantages and artistic drawbacks of such an institution. Yet curiously enough, the generations here have changed sides. In Britain, for example, the players of the present day look back on the Mrs. Kendalls, their predecessors, with a kind of affectionate pity for their old-fashioned rant; and the Mrs. Kendalls had no less pity toward them for their mumbling, naturalistic ways. At the Alexandrinsky this was reversed. People's Artist Yuryev—the leading actor of the Leningrad stage today—tells in his reminiscences<sup>1</sup> that in conversation when he was a young man, Maria Yermolova, the Ellen Terry of Russia, complained of the new-style actors that they "boom where we whispered, they hammer the stage with their heels, where we used to go on tip-toe."

The complaint is justified still, if the play I saw there in 1937 is characteristic. It had a kind of art-anonymity. No producer's name was given on notices or programmes, nor were the actors identified. Perhaps that was as well. It was a sorry affair.

It was a play written by Alexey Tolstoy the younger from a novel of his own, showing the contrast between the great, progressive, forthright Tsar Peter I and his despicable reactionary son.

Cherkassov was, I believe, playing the Tsar, and a fine,

<sup>1</sup> Творческие беседы мастеров театра, X (Leningrad, 1939), p. 11.

powerful, aristocratic performance he gave—a credit to Alexandrinsky history; colourful and dominant, but in an inartistically slow Martin-Harvey tempo, and grossly over-played. The actor playing Alexey his son, on the other hand, had an Art Theatre ‘sincerity,’ much underplayed; the two styles interfered with each other as irritatingly as did the over-filled sets with the audience’s angles of sight. One expects masking in an amateur production, but not in a century-old Russian professional one, even if anonymous.

Yet a theatre is not to be ignored which can claim within a decade and a half producers so eminent as Meierhold, Radlov, Solovyov, and Rappoport; and all these have done fine work there. Meierhold we have considered, and Radlov we shall be considering. Solovyov is a wanderer. He has produced in many theatres. In 1921, for instance, he did Molière’s *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* at the Theatre of People’s Comedy, Leningrad. In 1931, with Petrov, he staged a Hasenklaver play about Napoleon in the ‘Pushkin’ Theatre. Next year saw him at the Leningrad Printing House Theatre; and in 1934 he did two productions, one in Minsk—*Tartuffe*, at the State Byelorussian Theatre for Working Youth there—the other one back in Leningrad, Goldoni’s *La Locandiera* at the Krasny Theatre.

Rappoport<sup>1</sup> also is a wanderer, and also a Leningrad man. He produced *Antony and Cleopatra* at the theatre we are discussing in 1923, and two years later Ostrovsky’s *Crazy Money*. Next year he was doing an opera at the Leningrad Theatre of Opera and Ballet (formerly the Mariinsky, now the ‘Lunacharsky’). In 1930 he did a Chaikovsky opera at the Leningrad People’s House, and next year *The Tsar’s Bride* at the Little Opera House there—for in Russia opera is as carefully produced by men of the theatre as any play is. But he has also been in Moscow, where the famous rhythmic and colourful *Much Ado About Nothing*, about which I shall be writing later, was staged by him.

In the last few years the Pushkin Theatre’s most notable productions have been a revival of Ostrovsky’s *Forest*, the new

<sup>1</sup> Author, under the nom-de-plume S. Ansky, of *The Dybbuk*.

Meierhold *Masquerade*, Sardou's *Fatherland*, and a new play called *Lenin in 1918* by the authors of the film of that name. Of *Macbeth* I shall write when considering Shakespeare in the New Soviet Theatre.

Not long ago old Alexandrinskians were startled to find that in a production of Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, the leading part of Sophie had been given to a young actress who had left the theatre's training school only the previous year. I think this decision by the management caused more discussion and feeling than any waywardness of Meierhold had done. For if in the Soviet streets you are stared at when you walk without a jacket, in the Soviet Theatre there are customs as binding as any decree of the Supreme Council of Soviets, and one of them is that important parts must go to the artists best able to play them. You cannot buy good parts in the Soviet Theatre, nor can you wheedle them. Whether this young genius justified the management's decision, I do not know; she probably did. But in view of the really important issues involved, it cannot be said that the Pushkin Theatre is tradition-bound.

The Maly and the Alexandrinsky Theatres have often been compared with Drury Lane and Covent Garden in the eighteenth and part of the nineteenth centuries; and so, if we except our classical stage's fondness for tinsel and tiffany, perhaps they may be. But we have nothing like the Moscow Art Theatre, for there is nothing like it in the world. Since its foundation by the keen amateur Stanislavsky and the enlightened professional Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1898, it has suffered only one change, and that was a change of material rather than outlook. Its leading actors, Moskvin and Kachalov, Olga Knipper who is Chekhov's widow, and many other famous artists, who grew with it and learnt from it, and taught it, are still acting there. It has trained men in theatre craft who were to branch out so differently as Meierhold and Zavadsky, Vahtangov and Yanshin, Sudakov of the Maly, Bersenev of the Lenkom. It has dropped seeds that have taken root themselves, as studio theatres, as full-grown theatres, the Habbima, the Moscow Art Theatre Filial, the

Third Moscow Art Theatre, and so on. Some of these have died. But the Moscow Art Theatre goes on. Like the Maly, it is not large, seating 1,084. Its first name was Obshchedostupni Teatr, the Accessible Theatre, or plays at popular price. For it aimed at no precious intimacy with highbrows. It was to offer its products, prepared sometimes for a couple of years each, not to the rich, but to the masses. It had the attitude of the poets Pushkin and Po Chu-I, who were not satisfied that their poems were good till they had been read to old peasant women, who had understood them. The idea prevalent in our country at one time that the Moscow Art Theatre was in any way like our 'Little Theatre' movements is quite wrong. The Moscow Art Theatre did no local revivals of West-end plays; nor did it stylise its productions to give jaded tastes a new flavour.

Why it was not suppressed, I do not know. The habit of Tsarist officials was to suppress instantly any movement in any art which held a high regard for ordinary people. Perhaps the last Court did not take the theatre any more seriously than it took its responsibilities. Perhaps it felt the power of ordinary people becoming, at last, too strong. However that may be, this theatre survived. Its name was altered to the 'Art Theatre,' as opposed to the commercial theatre of its time, and as opposed to the art theatres of our time which tend to be as commercial, though hypocritically so. Later it became the Moscow Art Theatre; later still, after the Revolution, the Moscow Art Academic Theatre (because it had a training school), and finally the Order-of-Lenin Moscow Art Academic Theatre of the Union, in the name of Gorky, as it is now officially called. Only it is still known as the Moscow Art Theatre, just as the '25 October Avenue' in Leningrad is still on the lip as the 'Nevsky Prospect.'

Where shall we begin the portrait of this giant? I will assume that the reader knows how the Moscow Art Theatre grew in stature and knowledge until the Revolution of October 1917; how then, although it had always been 'for' the people, it was bewildered by political misunderstanding and a reluctance to accept a future so different from what in

its previous ‘non-political’ art-universe it had anticipated<sup>1</sup>; how it left Moscow on a long tour of Europe and America; how it returned to its old nest, and brooded, offering little to the new Moscow round it, its respect for the dignity and interest of individual men quite out of sympathy with impressionists and acrobats. I will assume that the reader knows how in 1925, like the Maly Theatre, it tried to interest itself in the Revolution with Trenyev’s *The Pugachov Rebellion*, which was as unsuccessful as Merezhkovsky’s *Nicolas I & the Decabrists*, that followed it; and how in 1927, all theatrical Russia was startled and pleased by its suddenly appearing with Ivanov’s *Armoured Train 14.69*, not as a reluctant hanger-on of the new theatre, but as the reinspired leader of it, its realism bright and definite, its sense of communal history broad and fervent, overtaking at a single stroke the vague theories, the crude immediacies, of the Left-Wing theatres. Left-Wing theatres dropped behind and sank.

The work done by the Moscow Art Theatre on Chekhov, and on Gorky, three of whose plays they had produced before the Revolution, was their bearing; but on no new course. They looked with the same eyes on a farther sea in the latitudes of Socialist Realism. Hitherto they had honoured man, as they saw him, with his faults and features, ambitions and aspects, difficulties and desires. They had been so fascinated by man that they faithfully showed how he walked or got out of a chair, a hundred ways, or how his tongue got stuck among his teeth. Anything that was not man was not interesting; but there was little that was not of interest to man, and therefore to them. They were like a friend of mine whom I once asked if he were interested in birds. His apology was, “I’m afraid not; there is so much to be interested in.”

If sometimes their plays had been centreless, their interests sometimes trivial, that had been because the men and women around them were centreless and trivial. Now they had only

<sup>1</sup> “The Revolution presented its demands to us, and we were caught unawares,” wrote Stanislavsky, looking back, in 1938. “Even though we had always been a revolutionary theatre, we were unprepared. A new search began, an overhauling of the old, a seeking for new paths.”

to accept the Revolution, they had only to recognise that Socialism means deeper and wider interests for more men and women, for all men and women; and they *were* the theatre of Socialism with all the necessary technique already. The cargo was changed, but not the course. The change was of material more than of outlook.

And so it happened. Gorky's plays *Yegor Bulychov* and *Enemies* (1934 and 1935) set the realism of the Art Theatre as Socialist Realism; and since then, whether they have been looking at the past, the present, or the future, they have been responding to Lunacharsky's call, and showing the Revolution its friends and its enemies, in their development and evolution, glorifying its exploits and its fallen heroes, but teaching it to love and to understand with greater clarity than to hate.

In 1937 their production of a version of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* caused a furore. It was very simply done, many scenes in little but velvet curtains; for 'realism' does not mean prolific brushes spattering plywood or hessian with landscape and architecture. Realism means that the characters before the audience are credible as human beings; credible under keen criticism from a knowing audience; from an audience that is itself composed of human beings. So although the play was a great social generalisation of the personal tragedy of a society lady in olden times, the woman was very fully and poignantly a woman. So great was the rush to see this superb production that it was easier for a foreigner to go to Paris and await there the arrival of the Moscow Art Theatre at the Exposition than to stay in Moscow and book seats months ahead.

But in the same year, not content with a perspective of the past, the Art Theatre gave a perspective of the present, in the play *Earth* by Virta, wherein a Kulak conceals his hostility to the Soviet system while secretly sabotaging it, and the drama is made from the conflict between him and a Bolshevik and a partisan leader. Patently a Socialist theme, but both the sympathetic and the antipathetic characters were given full life. . That is realism.

In 1938 the Art Theatre revived *Woe from Wit* by Griboyedov, who died in 1829. This is the spiritual tragedy of a young traveller who returns to Moscow society full of revolutionary ideas for the betterment of the world. Passionate, sincere, and intelligent (the sense of the word translated in the title as ‘wit’), he sickens at the intrigues and self-seeking cynicism of his native people, and when they turn on him and start rumours that he is mad, and when after much torturing anxiety he discovers that the girl he loves is as superficial as the rest, he abandons Moscow society for ever.

It is one of the classics of the Russian stage; human and dramatic. The Maly Theatre revived it at the same time as the Art Theatre, and playgoers seized the opportunity to compare Garrick with Barry. Both theatres had produced it before, the Maly Theatre when it was first written, with Shchepkin in one of his most famous rôles as Farnusov, the Tsarist official whose daughter Sophia is Chatsky’s love. Of course the original production had had a very different balance. Then, no doubt, Chatsky was a dangerous, peculiar young man; and though sadly misunderstood, he deserved his ultimate disappearance from society. The play was considered to be a comedy. Before being printed, it was circulated in MS., “arousing,” according to the author of a Guide to Russian Literature published as late as 1921,<sup>1</sup> “merriment and admiration”—the same way the English middle classes have been laughing at Shaw’s pictures of themselves as if they were pictures of somebody else. But the people created by Griboyedov are so intensely true, that the change of balance to the Socialist-Realist angle is minute; so minute indeed, that in the Moscow Art Theatre’s revival in 1938 Moskvin and Kachalov played the same parts as in its first production of the play in 1906.

According to an *Izvestia* critic, the Art Theatre was faithful to the stuffy atmosphere of Imperial Moscow, but was rather heavy in its sarcasm, whereas the Maly Theatre’s three producers, Sadovsky, Sudakov, and Alexeyev, presented the sparkle of the wit and the flash of the satire. This is very

<sup>1</sup> M. J. Olgin.

unexpected; and photographs seem to show the reverse, that the Art Theatre was more graceful and the Maly more 'produced.' But it is difficult to tell from photographs, and no doubt the *Izvestia* critic is right.

The next important Art Theatre production was another revival. Perhaps revival is the wrong word. Reanimation would be better. This play was *The Death of Pazuhin* (1939), by the satirical Saltykov-Shchedrin, a Government official who died in 1889, after having developed, in consequence of the circles he moved in, a sly, detached, almost diplomatic style, far more effective than any outspokenness. This work exposes blandly the moral corruption of the society of his time, and of course went unproduced for years. The Art Theatre first staged it about 1914, in a style as innocent as Saltykov's own, and this production was still in the repertoire in 1918. But by that time tempers were out for bolder things than blandness. Yet the patience of the Art Theatre endured; the wheel turned, and Saltykov came into his own again—in Socialist Realism.

1940 saw two important productions—*Tartuffe*, staged after prolonged study of Molière and his times, and *The Three Sisters*, revived after prolonged consideration and some painful experiments, to which we referred on pp. 16 and 17. Both were set by Dmitriev, who had done *Anna Karenina*. *Tartuffe* won a reputation for the gorgeousness of its plush, gold, and brocade; but the artist tells us that in fact it was one of the theatre's cheapest shows. The gorgeous effect was entirely due to the theatrical skill of the designer; and people don't realise, he complained, that a show 'in curtains' like *Anna Karenina* is far harder to do than a workman-like rural scene or painted interior. It was amusing to realise that this was the self-same Dmitriev who had done Meierhold's *Revizor* in 1926, and indeed was partner with him in his first Left-Wing production *Dawn* (Verhaeren), 1921, the geometrico-futurist abstractness of which was the first sign of the bio-mechanics to come.

Since 1940 the Moscow Art Theatre has brought out one big production—*The School for Scandal*—and is preparing another

—*Hamlet*—of which the latter will be one of the most important theatrical events in the world. But war-time information is scanty and haphazard, and at the time of writing I have heard little about either. So for the time we must leave the Art Theatre in Saratov, where it has removed bodily, with sets, costumes, props and all, to a local playhouse.

It will be seen that Socialist Realism was never really very far from the Art Theatre's methods; one might almost say it was the theatre's predestined mode, the only line it could take, yet only when Socialism was being achieved.

It may also be noticed that this theatre has been chary, it seems, of doing plays with a strictly contemporary theme. This reluctance was not due to any lofty attitude toward the affairs of the day. Moskvin is a member of the Supreme Soviet, and it would ill become a theatre to which he belonged to set itself up as isolationist, or archaeological. It may have been due to a standard of selection that rejects all plays that do not vouch a certain degree of goodness. In that case, I think it has missed at least three. But whatever the reason, there can be no gainsaying that the Moscow Art Theatre has hitherto been happier in the classics—classics of old Russia, new Russia, or the past of other countries. Now that is changed. Its recent production of Pogodin's *Kremlin Chimes* won workers of the Moscow Art Theatre no less than four Stalin Awards of 100,000 rubles each in 1941. The four new Laureates are Nemirovich-Danchenko, who produced it; People's Artist Hmelev, who assisted him; and the actors Livanov (People's Artist) and Gribov (Merited Actor), who played the leads.

When the earnest young Jew Eugène Vahtangov died in 1922 at the age of 39, the Habbima Theatre (a specialised offshoot of the Art Theatre), which he had founded to revive the ancient Hebrew language and culture, stayed in Moscow a while, then went abroad touring, and finally settled in Palestine. Vahtangov's Russian Theatre continued, under the management of his grave and charming widow. Simonov has been for years its principal producer, whom Norris

Houghton has described at work. But all his associates have acquired the same faculty—the faculty, as Houghton says, of making everything a little larger than life: if a character has a bulbous nose, it is a very bulbous nose; a woman of the street is a fearful woman of a fearful street. Yet reality is entire.

There is just as clearly a ‘Vahtangov Theatre’ quality as there is a ‘Moscow Art Theatre’ quality. Sometimes it is gestures, not features, which are extended; as in the rhythmic *Much Ado About Nothing* already mentioned, when a movement that began at the shoulder opened out the arm, and sent the hand travelling with the whole man after it from the centre to the side of the stage. Here silence was made significant. In this rhythm, time was measured. Or in *Intervention*, topography became eloquent. The ship that carries the white refugees breaks scenically in two; and up the Great Steps of Odessa, become monumentally, internationally large, march three soldier comrades, Russian, French, African. From forecast, having read Houghton’s description, I anticipated this silent epilogue would be an anti-climax. From evidence of senses I avouch that it was not.

It is common in many repertoires for principal actors to alternate small parts with large. Even in the Soviet Union it is not common for artists when off-duty as producers to be on-duty as actors, and vice-versa. But this happens in the Vahtangov Theatre. Simonov, for example, played Benedict—a swaggering, athletic Benedict, rather like Douglas Fairbanks; he also played Kostya the captain in *Aristocrats*. And the Vahtangov Theatre production of Alexey Tolstoy’s *The Road to Victory* (1939) saw two famous producers as leading actors—Simonov and Rappoport—as what popular poetry calls the ‘two suns’ of the Revolution, Stalin and Lenin, respectively. Contrariwise, Boris Shchukin, one of the best of actors who played Yegor Bulychov, occasionally lent a hand with production, as in Balzac’s *Human Comedy* and *Aristocrats*. Shchukin was so eminent an actor that after receiving many honours in his lifetime, when he died in 1939 at the age of forty-four, the street he had lived in was re-

named Shchukin Street. He had been twenty years at the Vahtangov, and made history by appearing as Lenin when Lenin was impersonated for the first time in a film (*Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918*). He was an example of the true actor, living and breathing the stage air, but not excluded from the world. If he did not die in harness, he very nearly did—in bed, reading Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le Comédien*. In 1937 he had made a tremendous impression as Lenin, in Pogodin's *The Man with the Gun*—a play I shall be dealing with at length later. But he was a modest man, and once having rather timidly consented to show at a party how Lenin would have sat down to table, did it so well that he had to cover his confusion by saying it had taken three months' practice to get right.

1939 and 1940 saw preparations for a play by Alexey Tolstoy called *The Campaign with the Fourteen Powers*, a play (*A Soldier comes from the Front*) founded on Katayev's story *I, Son of the Working People*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Don Quixote*, a typical balance being struck between the romantic-costume period and the grim history of the not-distant Soviet past. We have already mentioned Ohlopkov's production here of *Field-Marshall Kutuzov*. The Vahtangov, more than any of the other three theatres in this chapter, has an eye and ear alert for Soviet plays. For this, no doubt, the grey-haired lady in the office is partly responsible.

A bomb from one of the few aeroplanes that managed to pierce the Moscow defences damaged the beautiful modern theatre in Arbat, but I don't know what damage has been done. It is slightly bigger than the Art Theatre or the Maly, with a capacity of practically 1,200, and very clean and functional lines. Out of the rough brown mottled walls the boxes protrude like drawers. It would be sad to think of this beauty being spoiled.

One would expect the Theatre of the Revolution to be even more concerned with current events and Soviet themes than the Vahtangov. So it was when it started; Meierhold made it a place of propaganda, and when he left, it became a place of information, a sort of large-scale News Theatre. It

was at one time the largest strictly dramatic theatre in Moscow, but it held only 1,320 seats. Under A. D. Diky, an Art Theatre man, who took over when Meierhold was given his own theatre, the declamatory-formalist experiments were discontinued and a psychological period ensued, until 1930, when Alexey Popov became the new director with a new designer, Shlepyanov, and a battery of new dramatists—Vishnevsky, Pogodin, and Zarkhi. The policy became deeper and more serious, leading to a reflective style of production and play-writing which was in fact preparing for 'Socialist Realism'—a style which aimed at more exalted vision, political stimulation, profound actuality, and full satisfaction by the audience. An early play by Pogodin, *My Friend*, was produced there in 1936 by Popov, who was resident producer till that year; but since he left, the theatre has rather lost its way. It did an interesting *Fuente Ovejuna* by Lope de Vega in 1938, in which Laurencia was played by a young Communist actress as a kind of forerunner of Dolores Ibarruri ('La Pasionaria' of the Spanish War). Popov's productions of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Romeo and Juliet* which dates from 1936, were still in the repertoire in 1941. But this theatre seems to be getting tired. By the 1940-41 season it had joined the Mosssovet, Lensoviet, Dramatic, and Yermolova Theatres in a sweeping culpability for not doing original plays, nor indeed original choices of plays, but all copying each other. Doubling had become rife. *Masquerade*, *Mary Stuart* (Schiller), *The Doll's House*, were all to be seen in two theatres simultaneously, not from rivalry like the Art Theatre and Maly in Griboyedov, but from a desire to be the same, or just from laziness. The fact that the Vahtangov Theatre, for example, announced Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise* was enough for two other theatres to declare their intention of doing it also.

They borrowed other things than ideas. When the Theatre of the Revolution decided to do *Mary Stuart*, which had just appeared at the Lensoviet Theatre in Moscow,<sup>1</sup> the

<sup>1</sup> Founded 1926 for some graduates of GITIS; and for the first few productions accordingly adhered to classic plays. Its most notable name is that of the producer Zubov.

management were moving before reflection. As rehearsal time approached, it occurred to them that there was no one in the company equipped to play the title-rôle. They might have withdrawn the play, and no one would have thought the worse of them, but instead, they searched round for a guest actress. That was bad enough by Soviet standards; but they committed the horrible solecism of actually inviting over Suprotivaya, an actress of the Lensoviet Theatre away down on the other side of the city, to play the lead in theirs! Perhaps their summer tour of the Caucasian spas, among the ardent young foreigners there, was destined to restore their vigour; but here, undoubtedly, what a falling-off there was!

Undoubtedly too the situation was serious, and a reprimand had to be administered. It was with relief that lovers of the theatre heard of the resolution passed by the Committee for Art Affairs (which administers all the theatres in the Union) late in 1940, which noticed the unsatisfactory work of certain Moscow theatres (namely, these five bad scholars) in the matter of their repertoires, and called for as much care and originality to be spent on the choice of plays as on their production. There is no doubt that this by itself would be enough to jolt them into activity. There is also no doubt that the events of last autumn jolted them still more.

That the awaited improvement came was to be seen in the production of Arbuzov's *Tanya* late in 1939. This emotional play was a personal triumph for the actress Maria Ivanovna Babanova, a grey-eyed platinum blonde who had been working for some years in the Theatre of the Revolution, but had hitherto never quite shaken off the effects of her early 'formalist' training. In Arbuzov's play, after a year's study of the name part, Babanova completely identified herself with the heroine's sufferings, and gave so human, moving, and powerful a performance that her work was recognised in 1941 by a Stalin award of 50,000 rubles for her achievements in the region of dramatic art.

A Revolutionary Theatre which has not fallen behind, but on the contrary has developed well in recent years, is the

Leninist Komsomol Theatre (Lenkom), formerly called the TRAM. Founded in the NEP days of 1922 by a group of two dozen young workers who struck out for a virile, sarcastic drama, training themselves to become professionals and writing their own plays, this theatre has mellowed with the various Five Year Plans, and widened its range with its maturity. The actress S. Birman and the producer Ivan Bersenev are its best-known personalities, and it gives every kind of play from *Snegurocska* by Ostrovsky to *Comrade Women*.

In 1939 it gave *Destroyer Grevny* by a naval officer called Knecht. And in the same year achieved great fame by *My Son*, a study in Fascist oppression by O. Litovsky from a story by Sh. Gergel. This is a tremendously tense and moving play, and specially effective because of the acting of Serafina Birman as the mother of a condemned Communist, a part similar to one she had already played in the film *Friends*. Maria Esterag learns that her son has returned from Budapest and has been arrested on suspicion. He has been engaged on underground revolutionary work, and she has not seen him for twenty years. But she knows that if she gives herself away, his real name will be discovered; and if his identity is known, he will be executed. V. N. Solovyov plays the son; and both parts are said to be masterly studies in grief, fortitude, and restraint—in three prison scenes, he has literally no more than a dozen words, but dominates all the time. There are no histrionics, but his thoughts are readable in his face continuously.

(In contrast to this rendering we may profitably refer back to the opposite at Dniepropetrovsk 'Gorki' Theatre, where Maria was played in the old style, as a stock heroine, with no human warmth, and therefore no dramatic struggle.)<sup>1</sup>

The Lenkom's next production was *The Root of Life*, by a writer called Chekin, which dealt with the problems of a woman collective farmer. In 1940 followed *The Widow from Valencia* by Lope de Vega, a rather dull production, with a

<sup>1</sup> See p. 89.

Valencia of bare white stone by the artist Kozlinsky. It seems to have missed the subtlety of Lope de Vega. *Snegurochka* was quite another play. It is the fairy play from which Rimsky-Korsakov took the plot for his opera *The Snow Maiden*. Largely allegorical, with such personages as the Spring Fairy, Frost, and the demoniacal Tarantula and his gang in the fabulous land of the Berendeys (which is so like real life at one remove), it was vivid, alive, fresh, and human. The sturdy house of the Ant contrasted with the pitiful hut of the poor peasants, who jump and bow and palpitate like frogs before the symbol of wealth, the fat sack of grain, which the Ant carries on his back. The Tsar of the Berendeys is simple, and ineffectual. He goes about among his people, and is so sympathetic to their deplorable condition that he abdicates—a weak-willed tyrant, subject to fits of temper. If any further indication of Socialist Realism is needed, a study of this play with any of the black-browed early shows of the TRAM will give it; and it is also an interesting light on sociology that the charm of this never-never-land can entertain earnest Soviet citizens.

In 1941 this theatre was rehearsing *The Winter's Tale*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Cyrano was to be shown as a champion of humanism and of individual human rights. Galsworthy's *Windows* also was being prepared.

In addition to these old friends and their new developments, there are new theatres in the field, or theatres that have recently come to the fore in Moscow: the Bauman, the Central Railwaymen's, the Theatre of Satire, the Yermolova, the New Theatre (founded 1933 from a Maly Studio of 1922), the Hmelev, Diky, and Shatzky Studio Theatres, the Krasnoyarsk (suburban) Theatre, the Operetta, and others. In Leningrad there is the new big Red Theatre, the Gostram, the Comedy, the LOSPS, and others. All these are active, and have their various angles. One will include Shaw's *Geneva* (a little cynically, I should imagine); another started quite a vogue for J. B. Priestley, under the impression that he was a profound metaphysical philosopher; but this was soon

exposed, and the vogue ceased, as that of Galsworthy had done before it.

We have left to the end the four most interesting figures which, since the death of Stanislavsky and the deposition of Meierhold and Tairov, Socialist Realism has thrown to the top; and it is quite time that we turned to them now.

## CHAPTER X

### Alexey Popov

IN foregoing pages I have tried to show that the new Soviet Theatre is a general thing, applying to general people and springing from general origins. Theatre currents such as this usually find their own leaders. With Stanislavsky dead, Meierhold and Tairov a little out of sympathy still, and the influences of Lunacharsky, Vahtangov, and Granovsky now indirect, a lead had to be expected from some other figure. Such a figure, in my opinion, is found in Alexey Dmitrievich Popov.<sup>1</sup>

Popov is not an initiator, not a theorist, not a setter-up of apparatus; he is a consolidator, a thinker, a man of the theatre with something much higher than mere talent. For some years after the autumn of 1930 he produced at the Moscow Theatre of the Revolution, which had not then started its downward movement. The first production which drew attention to him was an early play by Nikolay Pogodin, called *My Friend*, one scene of which was reproduced in a number of theatrical journals: an office scene, in which one man is waving his hat to another as he leaves the stage, while on the backcloth a gigantic shadow of Lenin's statue, hand pointing, falls over a huge air-view of a modern city. The sets for this play were by Shlepyanov, an artist-producer who had worked for Popov on another Pogodin play, *Poem about an Axe*, in 1931. He was also finding his way to a new and more realistic experience of Shakespeare; and his *Romeo and Juliet* is still in the repertoire of this theatre. In 1936 he went to the Central Theatre of the Red Army in Moscow, where he assisted Goncharov in designing the sets for a relatively unimportant play, *Fighters*, which Tolchanov produced.

<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with Alexey Nikolayevich Popov, for some time in charge of the wardrobe at the Red Army Central Theatre. As a warning to the flippant, I would like to state that this common family name is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable: (approximately) *Pah-pawf*. Popov is yet another illustrious figure in the Soviet Theatre to have received early training at the Moscow Art Theatre.

The Central Theatre of the Red Army was founded in 1919 to give a permanent centre, as its name implies, to the various transitory Army theatres that had been existing in small units all over the country since 1917. Its policy was to give plays that would interest Red Army men, and also to give the general public plays about the Red Army. There can be no parallel over here with ENSA, not even (by stretching the imagination) in relation to the Home Guard. It has given the following plays, for example, all with a story taken from the deeds of the Red Army during the Civil Wars: *Lyubov Yarovaya*, *Armoured Train*, *The Days of the Turbins*, *The First Cavalry Army*, *Chapayev*, *The Wreck of the Squadron*, *The Path to Victory*, and *Professor Polezhayev*, by the following authors respectively: Trenyev, Ivanov, Bulgakov, Vishnevsky, Furmanov (from a novel), Korneichuk, Alexey Tolstoy, and Rahmanov—a remarkable list of first-class Soviet names. Of subjects from the work of the Red Army in ‘peace-time’ since 1922, *Fighters*, *Glory*, and *Silver Hollow* are by Romashov, Gusyev, and Pogodin. Besides these, Gusyev was in 1937 reported to have written a play in verse about the Red Army for this theatre called *Friendship*, and Vsevolod Ivanov (author *inter alia* of *The Armoured Train*) was working on a play about the Far East for it with the attractive title of *The Doves see the Cruisers Departing*.<sup>1</sup>

The Central Theatre of the Red Army, in fact, though unknown abroad in comparison with the middle-class experimental theatres, had always been a place of pride and importance to the Red Army, which in its turn had always been an institution of pride and importance to the people of the U.S.S.R. Nor was there that distinction, even in ‘peace-time,’ between the Army and the people which used to be found in the conscript armies of the French Democratic Empire, perhaps because of the professionalism and class-power of the latter’s officers; and was still more plain in non-conscript Britain before 1940. The Red Army and the public were the same.

The Theatre of the Red Army, therefore, was only an

<sup>1</sup> I have not been able to find any further information about these.

inner wrapper for the theatre of the people. It did plays that were of general interest, also. And its Director was a man of the people, without any specifically military position. The Red Army Theatre is not a kind of super-military-band organisation with its members tuning up by numbers to the signal of a uniformed and commissioned director. On the contrary, its Director has to be a man of general human sympathy; and to be selected for the job means to know it thoroughly and to have high qualifications of experience, sensibility, and theatrical talent. The Central Theatre of the Red Army is nearer to our ideal of a State theatre than any of the other theatres of Moscow. It was a smallish theatre, holding 900, but it has recently moved to an enormous building shaped like a star,<sup>1</sup> with a vast stage, and an auditorium seating 2,000; during the preparation of which, the Red Army Company occupied first the old Hermitage Hall, and then the Kamerny Building, while Tairov was away.

Actuality in the early 'thirties meant acting. Dramatic interest was of smaller importance than the illusion that what was being done on the stage had been done in real life. It was a reconstruction of events more than a theatrical representation of them; and two fine actors put all their technique into the reality of what they were doing—Hohlov and Ilchenko, soon to be joined by Alexey Petrov. The first producer to assume charge of this actors' Eldorado was Yuri Zavadsky, whom we shall be considering in the next chapter. He gave them psychological subtlety and speed and polish, but he was not the man to deepen the importance of the Red Army Theatre. He organised Valhalla, but could not reform it. His stay was short, and he was soon superseded by Alexey Popov, who was to draw from actors, musicians, artists, authors alike, the threads which he could wind into a supple, unbreakable, well-measured, well-designed flex of theatricality, able to take any load of any voltage.

Alexey Popov has proved himself to be the right man for this honourable and exacting post. Nothing is done on his stage that cannot be defended; but that does not mean any

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I and Frontispiece.

tameness in the conception. On the contrary, many of his productions evoke ripples of controversy—sure sign of a live wire.

I propose to examine here one of his Shakespeare productions in considerable detail; and I shall do so in this chapter, even if by rights it should be kept till the last, for several reasons: first, because it will show the scope and humanity of the Red Army Theatre; secondly, because I find in Popov a figure of such deep understanding that he should be treated as a subject complete in himself; and thirdly, for the somewhat worldly reason that there is plenty of detailed material available about the Red Army *Taming of the Shrew*, in a special booklet.<sup>1</sup>

But first a non-Shakespearean play: *Field-Marshal Suvorov*, by two young writers, I. Bahterev and A. Razumovsky, which Popov produced in 1939. Those who have seen the Soviet film on this subject<sup>2</sup> will not need to be told what it is about. Those who have not, and even those who have, may be interested in the following précis of the play.

Like the majority of Soviet historical plays, it is episodic. In the Prologue, Suvorov is twenty-eight years old. The time is during the break-up of Frederick II's army, and the fall of Berlin. The young Suvorov has been a private himself, and never forgotten this. We are shown his patriotism, his love of the people, and his care for the common soldier.

The play proper begins thirty years later: the Siege of the Turkish fort of Ismail. We see the intrigues of the courtier-generals, comparable to those round Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War, and the vacillation of Potyomkin himself. Suvorov inspects the troops. He does not point at their boots or hair; he cracks jokes with them. The final

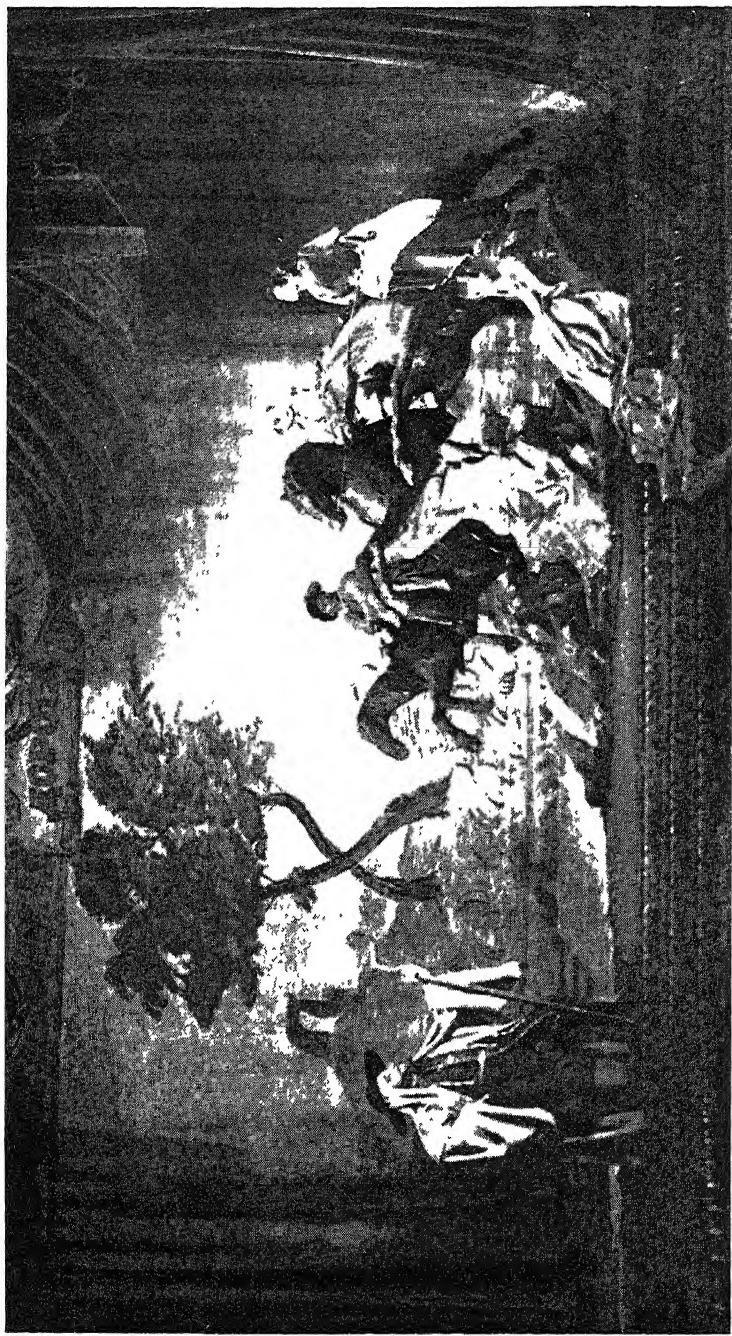
<sup>1</sup> Укрощение строптивой в центральном театре красной армии. A collection of articles by Morozov, Popov, Urbanovich, Boyadjiev, and Shifrin. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1940.)

<sup>2</sup> Films and plays, and often, too, novels in the Soviet Union may appear within a short while of each other under the same title and author's name, especially on historical themes; and it is not always easy to discover which came first, though it is generally the novel. When the author has some knowledge of the theatre, and the film, he will write all three himself, as Alexey Tolstoy did with *Peter the First*. In other cases, the play is considered to be by the author of the original story, even if it is a narrative poem, or if the play is only one detail of a vast canvas.



Alexey Popov, whose stature as a producer has grown with the  
New Soviet Theatre.

He directs the Central Theatre of the Red Army in Moscow.



The Journey Scene in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Popov's problem was that the people are English, though the comedy is Italian. The tapestry backgrounds solve it. "Socialist Realism," does not save the audience from using its imagination.

assault on the fort takes place on the signal of a cock-crowing. This Suvorov does himself, very realistically. The soldiers have been waiting for months, and many have died of the extreme cold. It was important, therefore, to give the atmosphere of this ice-bound country, at dawn. This was done by a snow-scene (white plush everywhere) seen through an almost colourless gauze downstage.

In the second scene we are introduced to Paul I, who has recently become Tsar. He is strongly Germanophile and wants to reorganise the army on a Prussian model. Suvorov opposes this. The Tsar dangles promises of agreeable rewards; but Suvorov is not to be bought. He replies proudly and cuttingly that he, Suvorov, is a better man than Frederick II ; he has never lost a battle. The Tsar has given orders that uniforms are to be cut to a Prussian pattern, and Suvorov's uniform does not conform to this. He expels Suvorov from the court, and the dismissed general settles down to a quiet country life, under the watch of spies, who report all his doings to the Tsar's police.

Time passes, and the Tsar becomes anxious about the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. He sends for Suvorov, now an elderly man, and puts him in charge.

The scene is now Switzerland, and at a romantic-looking place known as the Devil's Bridge. Suvorov meets the enemy. He meets any number of enemies on his own side, and is all but betrayed by Austrian generals who are supposed to be his allies; and by fifth columnists among his own staff, including Baron von Vogel, whom he had always supposed to be his friend. Indeed he had trusted him specially because of his loyalty to the common people. But this does not prevent him, when he realises the necessity, from ordering the Baron's execution as a traitor.

Now he gives the command to force the Devil's Bridge. "Where the deer can pass, the Russian soldier can get through; and even where deer cannot pass, the Russian soldier can get through." (This roused great applause in the house, long before the German invasion.)

The enemy have broken the bridge, which had crossed a

narrow abyss. Suvorov orders his men to demolish a hut at the back of the stage, and use the timber to build a new one. (By a nice piece of stage design, from Fyodotov and Shifrin, the demolishing of this hut which Suvorov has been using as his H.Q. reveals a sensational view of the Swiss Alps behind.) The passage is forced and Suvorov returns to Russia in triumph. But the Tsar, now jealous of his popularity, refuses to see him, making his excuse that Suvorov had, contrary to orders, retained on his staff a certain officer who had been nominated to other duties. In the final scene, Suvorov sends the Tsar's messenger out of his house, telling him to inform the Tsar that Suvorov is dead. Then he recalls the man and adds, "No; tell the Tsar, Suvorov is alive, and will live in every Russian soldier. He will never die." The messenger goes, and Suvorov, exhausted, ends his life in the arms of his daughter and an orderly.

The authors and Popov and the actor Nечайев made no attempt to play Suvorov up as a man of advanced social views. He was not. But they did try to show the true Suvorov, and not the maligned figure of Court memoirs. On the other hand, they avoided the temptation of making Paul I a figure of fun or a hateful grotesque. Historically, he was of small understanding and very mean nature. And this much of antipathetic character is shown in him. Otherwise, by keeping the balance fair, they heightened the drama.

This does not mean that there is no weight. The two sides do not cancel out. The end has no weary withdrawal of the author or producer from the whole problem, leaving the audience to decide. *Strife* or *The Skin Game* have no parallel here. But Paul is credible, not a revolutionary's cliché, not a dummy labelled 'Tsarist Oppression'; and the humanity of Suvorov is all the deeper for his struggle against real stupidity and real intrigue.

Humanity is the keynote of all Popov's work; and he has so deep an understanding and love of humanity that he makes out of *The Taming of the Shrew* a play that sounds as new to our ears as it must also sound authentic.

There were two approaches to this often rather dry and

impossible piece. As Popov himself has written, it can be treated as a comedy of situations; in which case it has affinities which the *commedia dell' Arte*, the story of Petruchio and Katherine should be played as strolling players would perform it, and the centre of reality is in the Sly prologue, as it was in Reinhardt's production (Berlin, 1920). Or it can be a comedy of character, in which case it becomes a play for the play's sake—what Popov calls 'Turandotage.'<sup>1</sup> Then Sly is left hanging in the air—or at least sitting in the gallery—with hardly a word to break his slumber, and no exit at the end: a kind of Sleeping Clergyman, but with even less significance.

Now, the essence of a Socialist-Realistic production is that it finds and gives expression to the *byt*, the way of life during the period concerned: and this *byt* includes customs, habits, costumes, surroundings, sociological influences, and general orientation of thought, as adhered to or contravened (with all the myriad variations of human society) by the individuals concerned; and all subject to the philosophy of their creator, himself involved (sometimes approving, sometimes feeling horror or disgust) in the period.

To get this *byt*, Popov decided to treat it as a play of both characters and situations. There is no space here to discuss the purpose of the Sly prologue with its two half-hearted intermissions later on. Myself I do not doubt that Boyadzhiev is right when he says that Shakespeare intended to write a living, contemporary scene, starting the play with English characters familiar in kind to his audience.<sup>2</sup> Then he may have forgotten Sly, having got more interested in his Italians; or he may have trusted to his company extemporising during rehearsal, or he may have simply left the rest of Sly's story as given in the old play *The Taming of a Shrew*, from which he was working, and not bothered to write it all out. The epilogue after the Supper scene, which is printed in the Arden edition, is not inadequate as an end, and has been used in some productions today. Sly wakes up and takes a lesson

<sup>1</sup> „Турандотовщина.“

<sup>2</sup> “In Sly are the contours of the portrait of Falstaff to be” (*op. cit.*, p. 63).

from what he thinks has been a dream. But it is questionable whether so sugary a precept would have satisfied Shakespeare, and Popov certainly could not have reconciled it with his interpretation of Shakespeare's meaning.

The trouble with the whole Sly framework is that it puts a triple strain on the actors. Not only must they act English strolling-players pretending to be Italians without boring the (real) audience by their poor ability, but they must in several cases act players pretending to be Italians pretending to be other than they are for the sake of the plot, without confusing either the audience or themselves. Consummate actors might achieve this, but it would scarcely be worth while.

Popov accordingly decided to cut Sly out altogether, and centre the reality in Italy as seen by Shakespeare. The spiritual key was *joie-de-vivre* with all the contradictions of the Elizabethan and Renaissance social system: the nobility with the mean intrigues, the crudeness and the cynicism with the extraordinary purity of heart. Visually, from a study of painting and wood-cuts, he found a need of spatiality<sup>1</sup> and domestic craftsmanship. N. A. Shifrin, his art-director, doing his own first Shakespearean settings, found a need to suggest Padua as imagined by Shakespeare in Soviet-Russian terms. "War was declared on properties, plywood, and fake-furniture." Woodworkers produced real tables with real mouldings. Tapestries, actual to all interiors in Shakespeare's day, but capable of alluding continuously to the scenes, sunlight, people, and movement that Shakespeare would have painted if he had been a painter, did the rest.

For Baptista's house, one tapestry represents a group in a loggia; in front of an eau-de-nil alcove partially concealed by a twisted crimson curtain and containing a chest with a vase on it, sits the lady of the house in white velvet doing embroidery on a horizontal frame; behind her, hand on hip, stands a man in a dark blue doublet and cap (perhaps her steward), while from behind her Tudor chair peeps a Tudor child in a long blue gownlet and a scarlet cap. The lady is looking

<sup>1</sup> One could almost think he had read Adrian Stokes on the spatiality of Renaissance Italian Art.

over her frame at an Arab merchant in a chocolate-coloured robe, kneeling to display his wares—a length of corn-yellow silk that cascades from his fingers, and various articles that lie in baskets on the tiled floor. In the foreground, on the tiles, creeps an enormous snail towards a cat, curled in a ball. Past the crimson curtains is a glimpse of another room, with red walls and a timbered ceiling and a red staircase down which a figure is coming. On the other side of the alcove, on a balustrade, sits a peacock, surveying a little rocky inlet of the sea, with ships at anchor, and a modern cloudscape.

Similarly, the design of the tapestry representing a square in Padua is exactly in the spirit of the high Renaissance, but the colours are anything but classical: a magenta curtain being pulled back on a chocolate portico, while lemon sunlight sprays over piazza and buildings, forming great ports of chocolate shadow from both sides at once, while lazy cotton-wool clouds drift by.

In the photographs facing pp. 144 and 145 may be seen tapestries with many active figures—the various families congregating perhaps for the wedding feast, which is being celebrated on the stage in front of them; and in the left-hand panel there is even a remarkable blend of decoration and action, since the feast on the stage has already begun in the right-hand bottom corner of the tapestry. In these designs is a patchwork of delicate colours, under a cool, pale, and peaceful sky, with the liveliness, the *joie-de-vivre* of the multi-coloured costumes taken up by the voices of the actors on the stage—an extension of the ideas of Williams in the *Pickwick Club* at the Moscow Art Theatre Filial, but with much deeper and wider significance—to suit the play. Similar reality was sought for costume and make-up of the actors.<sup>1</sup> Shifrin and his assistant Fyedotov went about Moscow with eyes and sketch-books open. Bianca's nurse came from the Bazaar at Kislovodsk, a Caucasian spa; others from passengers in trams.

But it is by the characters themselves, not by their outward

<sup>1</sup> The make-up of characters is as much a part of the setting in the Soviet Theatre as their clothes or background, and is therefore sketched by the designer in consultation with the régisseur.

appearances nor atmosphere through the eye, that a Shakespearean production stands or falls. Petruchio often is acted (especially by successful individualists anxious to 'get the character') as what Boyadzhiev calls a rough, ruthless woman-tamer menacingly twirling violent moustachios, clumping about in military boots, cracking a thick whip, yelling himself hoarse, laughing rudely in his wife's face, and behaving like a madman—all as 'the character.' Katherine, on the other hand, is often acted by an elderly lady with an artificial voice, devoid of any sort of charm, and to all intents fixed in such a pathological condition that the boorish Petruchio becomes a hypocrite when he mentions love; she then suddenly suffers an unaccounted-for change, becomes as mild as milk because her husband treats her like dirt, and adds to our incredulity by her last speech, in which she calmly lays down rules for the guidance of her much meeker friends.

Such behaviour is so foreign to most people's experience, that this comedy tends to be boring and Shakespeare's reputation as a psychologist somewhat questionable.

Popov's interpretation, however, based on a deep study of the text from a theatrical angle, is something quite different. He started with Petruchio (played by V. Pevstovsky) as a practical young bachelor; he has neither the majesty of an aristocrat, the erudition of a scholar, nor the delicacy of a poet. An everyday person, who goes to Padua in search of capital for investment in mercantile projects. Women do not interest him much, but a bride with a good dowry does, even if she is 'difficult.' He is played realistically, contrasting with the baroque bombast of Lucentio and the sentimental Hortensio. But all three are bound up with each other, as will shortly be seen.

Petruchio settles the financial side of the matter with Baptista without having set eyes on Katherine. When Hortensio re-enters (Act II, Scene i) with the broken guitar round his neck, Petruchio bursts out laughing, and begins to 'set' himself into a character—not 'the character of Petruchio,' but a mischievous, 'ragging' part—feels about for an

effective pose, and finally throws himself in a lordly fashion on the settee. Katherine (played very subtly by Dobrzhanskaya) makes a superb entrance. She is physically attractive, bright-eyed; she stands in the doorway, erect, waiting for him to make the first move. The duel is on.

Petruchio is not expecting anything like this. This superb creature is not the shrew he has heard about. He is fascinated at first sight. He forgets the pose, the words he has decided to say, the dowry, his contempt for women. He opens his eyes in astonishment and admiration. And calls her 'Kate'—the familiar name.<sup>1</sup> Katherine advances to battle, and Petruchio is forced on his guard. The only defence he can think of is attack, the attack of a boisterous young bachelor.

But that first surprise of Petruchio is the key to the comedy. Every word she utters reveals her to him. She is spiteful, obstinate, embittered, coarse, and supercilious. She is also candid, fearless, honest, beautiful, witty, and self-reliant. The contradiction is common when a girl is at odds with her environment. And Katherine is so. She is a stranger to her sister, and to her father, who treats her more like a step-daughter—a stranger in character, ideas, and education. She despises and hates those round her, their hypocritical piety, their false proprieties, their mincing affectations. She talks straight to everybody. She is thrown in upon herself. She is both self-sufficient and desperately lonely. So she longs to have people round her whom she will feel are not her inferiors; and at the same time she hates people. Every trivial word goads her. She flies into uncontrollable passions. And when she finds she has caused this handsome young man to behave to her as crudely as everyone else does, the only thing she can think of is to slap his face, as if it were her own.

Now, Petruchio is fond of repartee. Nobody enjoys a duel of wits more than he—even if his growing interest has divided

<sup>1</sup> The Russian is even more pointed than the original: *Kotyik* (= Kitty, with the same pussy-like connotation as in the English), has even more endearment in it than *Katya*.

his mind a bit with a lowering effect on his tongue. But he does not take slaps in the face. His hand goes to his dagger.

It stays there, though. Katherine, who has hardly been able to look at him, out of her sourness, has now faced him. A taming has begun already—the taming of Petruchio. And back goes the dagger into its sheath, as he faces up to a new task—to make this remarkable girl not only his wife, which by financial arrangement she already is, but also his friend. As the play proceeds, he notices the occasional kindly note in her voice, when she is off guard. But he turns his face away, so that she cannot see his pleased smile. He knows an easy conquest is not a lasting one ; and first he must release her from her egoism, spite, and haughtiness, the products of her surroundings.

It is not only by his rough treatment that he wins her. This disturbs her, certainly. She does not know whether she loves or loathes him; but she cannot despise him. His activity, tenacity, and astuteness show her that he is an adult, and she is still a child, fretful when she doesn't get her own way, and dissatisfied when she does. So in time, she holds out a friendly hand to him, harsh and boorish though she thinks he is.

Meanwhile the other characters have received no less consideration as living people, not stage people. Baptista, for instance, may be met frequently in Britain today—a rich gentleman who barters his daughters like landed property and is at the same time unctuous, pious, and a stickler for correct behaviour. Bianca is a silly little thing, ‘gracefully limp like Botticelli,’<sup>1</sup> outwardly submissive, inwardly artful. It is not necessary to particularise. All are in the round. And this roundness extends, as in a good novel, to the minor characters, and even to the servants.

The servants are an important feature of the production. They are all deeply loyal to their masters, each in his own characteristic way; and all take on a certain trait from the household they live in. From tiny hints and implications in the text, each has a past history that makes their actions

<sup>1</sup> Boyadzhiev.

explicable; and as a whole, an important share in rendering the background and life of the times true and interesting. These parts developed, naturally, in rehearsal and were a boon to the smaller actors, who, as Urbanovich says, were thus given a chance, with the producer, "to rummage in history, in Shakespeare, in the raw material, and in their own imaginations." It also makes for gaiety and *joie-de-vivre*. Thus in Act I, Scene ii (where Tranio appears, made up like Lucentio), Grumio and Biondello mime their masters' quarrel in parallel, so to speak. They peer at each other, bow diffidently, get interested in each other, and finally, becoming more intimate, sit side by side on a bench and eat apples: a sign that they are only quarrelling because of their masters—nothing personal.

Grumio has been Petruchio's constant companion on all his travels. He has often proved useful when Petruchio has got into a scrape and has had to leave a place in a nocturnal hurry. He is thirty years old, tough, uncouth, and a bit morose. Even when he cracks a joke he seems to do it unwillingly. He looks lazy, but is resolute when once in action. He is oppressive to the other servants, but they respect him, as the master's right-hand man. There is a kind of virile affection between master and man; they are more like friends. And a trace of jealousy, too. When Petruchio goes wife-hunting, Grumio doesn't see what use he can be, and pulls his master's leg rather sulkily. Petruchio strikes him, and he falls to the ground, loudly exaggerating his outraged feelings.

Curtis, on the other hand, is a very old servant of Petruchio's father, and of his grandfather. Nobody knows how old he is. Petruchio has inherited him with the property. There are few women in this house; and the servants behave much as they like. Curtis fusses about the household economy all day long. On his belt hangs a bunch of keys—of the cellar, of the cupboards, of the barns, of the whole house. He never leaves the house. He has a fatherly love for all its inhabitants. They mock him much, but are very fond of him.

Petruchio's wedding is the most important thing in this

old man's life. He wants to hold a son of Petruchio's in his arms. Katherine will be a new mistress, with whom he will have to establish working relations. He is pleased when things improve between her and his young master. The scene when Petruchio brings the bride 'home' is an illustration.

Upstage, a large fireplace. Twilight on a wintry day. On a table a lad is playing with an arquebus. Another has dropped beneath the table and is performing on a pipe, rather miserably. A third has clambered on to the chimney-breast and is weaving a basket and drawling out a song. They are all very bored and very cold. Through the empty rooms a sharp wind blows. Master is away, and the boys are 'ragging' old Curtis. They start a fearful din. Curtis comes in, quite bewildered. When he goes out, they jeér at him (Act IV, Scene i). Suddenly Grumio tumbles into the room, shrammed with cold. He shouts for Curtis, and the echo runs round the cold dismantled rooms. In runs Curtis, more bewildered than ever; and behind him come the rest of the 'gang,' tumbling over each other to welcome Grumio home. One hits him behind the neck, another scrambles on to his shoulders, a third digs him in the ribs. Grumio hurls them all into a heap, and spreads old Curtis over them. It all evolves by theatrical logic from lines 107 to 118 of Act IV, Scene i.

Contrast with this the atmosphere of Baptista's household. It is one of the best in town, but Baptista has no wife and his daughters pay small attention to him. The household is run by the servants; but with more dignity and tradition than Petruchio's. In Act II, Scene i, Baptista's sigh, "Was ever gentleman thus grieved as I?" after the stormy little scene between his daughters, is said to an old kinsman who has a stage life all his own. He gives the impression that he is a distant relation of Baptista's dead wife; about seventy. No special qualities and no livelihood. Has gone through all his money and now has to be content with a pension from Baptista. Hence always trying to please his 'benefactor.' Baptista keeps him on for the sake of his respectable nature

and remarkable beard. These give the household solidity. Also he helps Baptista to keep his books and looks after the servants. And if Baptista dies, he will just have to stretch his legs, as he has no aptitude for work.<sup>1</sup>

The motherless girls have two women who take their sides: the old nurse, a gaunt, agile woman, who has tended Bianca as a child, lives again in her life, hopes to nurse her children, and therefore abets her in the runaway marriage; and Lucietta, seventeen years old, brought from the country, in service quite recently, merry, inquisitive, and just beginning to settle down in household ways that are strange to her. She admires Katherine and shares her joys and griefs. Incidentally, so vivid has her stage life become that she can even be identified as the niece of Antonio, Baptista's oldest and most confidential servant. Adam is a well-built, tall man of about thirty, indispensable for gala days. Can look very impressive, and bosses the other servants about. Pompey, on the other hand, is short and chubby, a toady and a sneak. His object is to crowd Antonio out of his job and take his place.

In Act III, Scene ii, the household is in a hubbub. They are waiting for Petruchio to fetch his bride to church. The servants are very worried when he does not turn up. The shame of the Baptista family is their shame too. Still more perplexed are they when he turns up in old clothes. His disrespect for Katherine is an insult to them.

But now Katherine and Petruchio have set out for the church to get married, and the wedding feast is being prepared. To music, in mime, come servants from all directions carrying plates, decanters, goblets, trays, food, and the wedding cake in the shape of a boat.<sup>2</sup> Adam wanders about, superintending. A roll of carpet is placed at the door. In runs Gremio from the church with news of how the ceremony went off, and how Petruchio behaved. The activity of the preparations

<sup>1</sup> Urbanovich, *op. cit.* Urbanovich is an assistant producer at the Central Theatre of the Red Army, and head of its training-school.

<sup>2</sup> There being no word in Russian for cake, this gastronomical curiosity is called alternatively the wedding pie and the wedding tart. I am not at all sure that in any case it is not an anachronism on Popov's part.

covers a reasonable amount of time, theatrically, for a short service; and also indicates the almost ritual nature of marriage in feudalesque households. Then solemn choral music is heard. Out run the servants, unrolling the carpet. The old kinsman moves up to a vase of flowers. Down the carpet come the bride and bridegroom, their faces rather solemn at this moment of commitment; behind follow their guests and servants. The old kinsman sprinkles flowers on them. All is set for a great feast and a happy ending. Then follows the bombshell of Petruchio's hurried departure to his own house in the country, taking the bewildered Katherine with him.

Meanwhile, in Petruchio's home, the servants have all developed personalities of their own, and special jobs—one becomes a huntsman, another looks to the horses, another does the provisioning, and so on. They like doing nothing; they like music and wine and food; they can work when they want to—it is obvious that Katherine's arrival is going to start some radical changes! They also like practical jokes, especially Nathaniel, a tall thin man of about thirty, recently joined, but at home already. Philip is a country boy of about seventeen, with a knowledge of animals and field and forest life. He is silent in company, but does his jobs quickly and with skill. Joseph is a twenty-five-year-old sailor who attached himself to Petruchio on one of his voyages. The cook is a mulatto of about thirty. Petruchio once saved his life. So practically the whole household is more a gang of rough friends than the liveried servants of a young man of position.

When theatrical time has to pass, amusing mime cameos are invented.<sup>1</sup> For instance, during preparations for Petruchio's return, behind the laden servants comes old Curtis with a basket of flowers on his back. He drops two bunches on the floor, without noticing. In come servants with copper jugs. Seeing the flowers, they put the jugs on the floor and run off

<sup>1</sup> The Russian theatre evening is on a larger scale than ours. And Russian plays are written, as they always have been, to last up to four hours. A short three-act play is rare. When non-Russian and shorter works are done, they are filled out as far as possible, though not with padding. It is a question entirely of internal proportions, and under these conditions not reprehensible.

with the flowers, forgetting about the jugs. Old Curtis, having missed the two bunches, comes back for them. To his surprise, he finds copper jugs instead. The superstitious old brain jumps to the conclusion that some magician has transformed them. Staring at them in horror, he backs out behind the curtain. When he is out of sight, the mulatto cook saunters in, carrying two huge kitchen knives. He stumbles over the jugs. Recovering, he sticks the knives in the floor and goes out with the jugs. Old Curtis, having thought over the matter, decides it is his duty to take the jugs away. Back he comes, but the same unseen hand has now transformed the jugs into sinister, quivering knives. He lets out a yell and rushes in panic from the haunted room.

But on the arrival of Katherine and Petruchio, Popov uses the camaraderie of Petruchio's men to strengthen and clarify what is going on between bride and bridegroom. Petruchio strides in demanding why nobody has come to meet him—a splendid entrance into the hubbub of the welcome for Grumio. During the mock meal, it is Grumio who has to say the grace; and then at a glance from Petruchio, to say it again. He is astonished, but during the meal not only he but the whole gang realise that Petruchio is playing a part—'ragging.' Hitherto they have been terrified by what appeared to be Petruchio's 'mood.' They see his motive, and when Petruchio takes his bride off to bed without any supper, they re-act in mime the scene that has just passed. Out of the bedroom comes Petruchio with a dish of food in his hand; he waves to them, and they all go off to another room to have their meal.

Their understanding is not shared by the silly ass Hortensio, when he arrives at Petruchio's house after forswearing his unsuccessful (and not very deep) love for Bianca and announcing his intention to marry a rich and ugly widow instead. In the scene where Petruchio tantalises Katherine with lovely clothes that he has no intention of letting her wear, Hortensio does not notice the change that has taken place in Katherine. She is quieter now; she is not far off tears; because the hand she has extended to Petruchio has gone

untaken. It seems as if Petruchio had deliberately not noticed it; and not the degradation of returning to Padua in dirty clothes (they have had an engineered accident while riding out to Petruchio's house, you remember), but the degradation of having fallen for this boor, affects her spirits.

Realisation comes in the Road scene (Act IV, Scene v, in many editions), with which Popov opens his last and most brilliant act. The décor is sensational. Across a tapestry of a rural scene, Katherine, Petruchio, and Hortensio are galloping on practicable horses. Long rehearsal have made the horses really unnecessary; the actors could convey the gallop without them. But they help the audience; and the audience applauds. Petruchio is still ragging; he demands that his wife follows his worst absurdities about the sun and the moon. His mockeries have ceased to make her wild. Now they hurt her. Petruchio seems to get mad about the sun and the moon. He checks the horses with as strong a hand as he is checking his wife. She steals a look at him, as she says resignedly:

“ What you will have it named, even that it is;  
And so it shall be, so for Katherine.”

It seems she has lost all hope now of coming to an understanding with this absurd man. His blunt obstinacy has worn her down and she is ready for the final degradation of life with him under impossible conditions. But now comes old Vincentio (Lucentio's father) in sight along the road; and during the subsequent fooleries of Petruchio pretending that the old man is a sweet village maiden, Katherine suddenly realises that Petruchio is ‘ragging’ her; he was ragging her over the sun; he was ragging her over the clothes and the food; he was ragging her when he first met her. He has always been ‘taking her off.’ And yet he has married her. Katherine suddenly discovers that Petruchio really is in love with her—as deeply and respectfully as she is with him. And simultaneously, in a flash of theatrical inspiration on Popov's part, she decides to ‘rag’ him back. “ Young budding

virgin," she begins to old Vincentio with great gusto—and then steals a sly look at her husband, as if to say, "Well, how do you like that? And can't you see that I'm going back to Padua a very different person from when I left it? And all my past behaviour was just childishness and a waste of time."

Petruchio's heart leaps inwardly; but outwardly he keeps up the pretence for the last time with a consequent minor double meaning in Katherine's end speech in this scene, "Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes, That have been so bedazzled with the sun, That everything I look on seemeth green" (= young and fresh)—after which the newly found lovers do not speak to each other again till they kiss at the end of the next scene.

The comedy within the comedy is over. But there is no anti-climax. To appreciate properly the points of the finale we must first gather together the threads of the two minor plots.

It will be remembered that there are three rival suitors for the hand of the flashy Bianca: Lucentio, who wins her; Hortensio, who decides in the end to marry the old widow; and old Gremio, who never stood a chance with her, however much his friend her father might approve. Two rival suitors are bad enough in a costume play; but three are bewildering for the audience. So to isolate Gremio as soon as possible, Popov contrived the following little interlude :

Offstage are heard singing and guitars. Gremio is coming to serenade Bianca in the garden; determined to spare no expense to show his wealth, and no pains to show he is still young and active. He sings, accompanied by hired musicians. His voice is cracked, and he has difficulty in keeping time; but his passion is boundless. Out on her balcony comes Bianca, forewarned by Lucentio. In from the wings creep Baptista's servants, unseen.

The infatuated old man tries to climb up the balcony pillar to kiss Bianca's fingers. She mischievously substitutes her old nurse's shawl. The servants titter. He looks round, and up and down, and finds he can't budge either way. The servants burst into laughter. Then Pompey and Antonio come

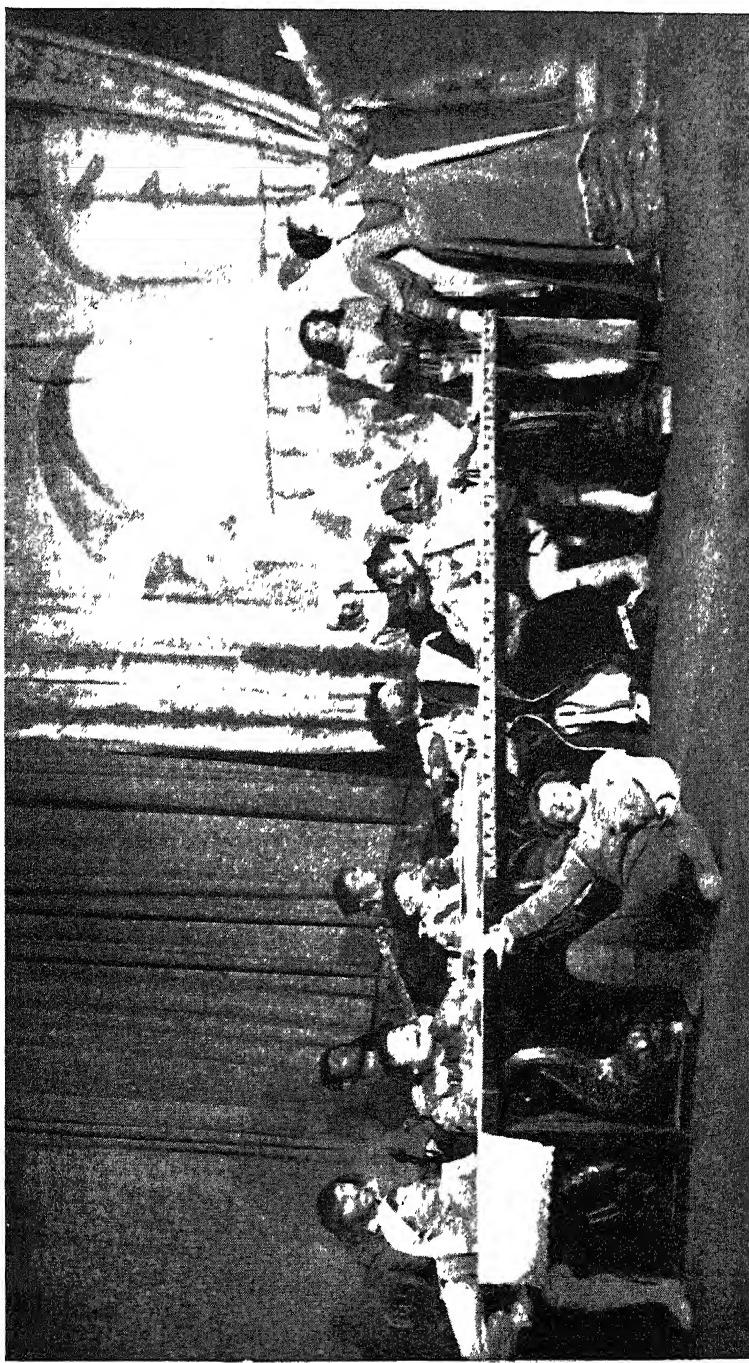
and rescue him from the pillar, solemnly carrying him out as if he were a casualty, and the other servants follow, laughing their heads off. This sort of thing doesn't happen every day!<sup>1</sup>

This unforced little scene must have a triple effect. Not only does it make clear Gremio's position, and so help the audience to follow the plot; not only does it give a general lightness and *joie-de-vivre* to the production; but it also gives a perspective to the ways of Renaissance merchant-fathers. The servants of the house are loyal to the family, as we have seen; but the common sense of ordinary people, who did not have occasion to sell their daughters to their friends, sees the absurdity of an old man like Gremio ever hoping to be 'happy' with a girl as young as Bianca. In other words, these unspeaking servants are really Shakespeare's comments on this aspect of his times.<sup>2</sup>

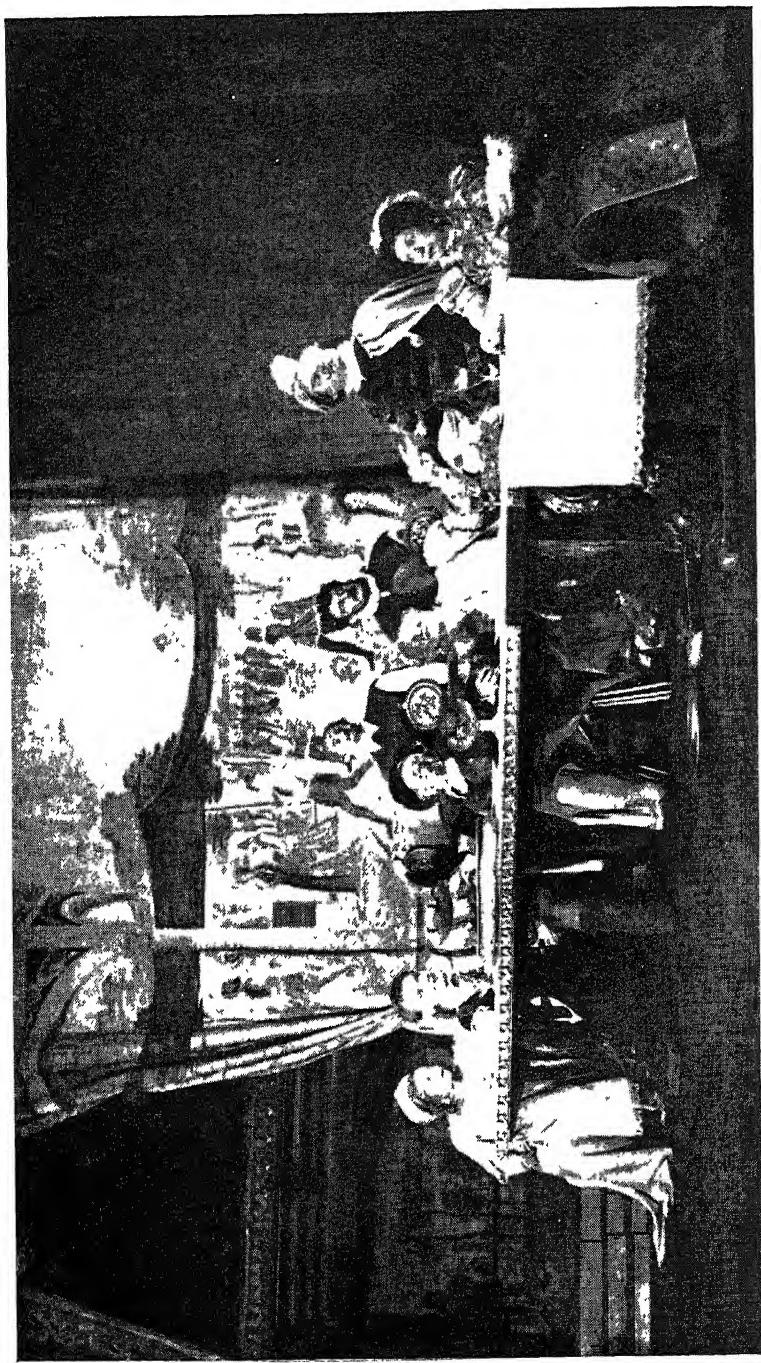
We now come to Lucentio. His old father, Vincentio, has servants who are also relevant to the story, though his household does not come on the stage. Only two concern us, but they have more importance to the story than any others. Tranio is the son of a Bergamo sailor, and has been attached to the house since he was three. One year older than Lucentio, he was his companion in childhood's lessons and games. Though a servant, he had the same education as Lucentio, and therefore has no difficulty in pretending to be Lucentio, when Lucentio gains access to Bianca by pretending to be a tutor. Tranio has always taken the blame for Lucentio's misdeeds, and is accustomed to thinking of his young master first. A typical scene is where (pretending to be Lucentio) he takes Hortensio to the summer-house to show him how Bianca is really in love with 'her tutor' (the real Lucentio). As he watches Hortensio's reactions, his own are twofold—rage, to encourage Hortensio, and joy at Lucentio's obvious success.

<sup>1</sup> Urbanovich.

<sup>2</sup> I think our producers are often apt to forget, in their search for 'The Atmosphere' or 'The Character,' that Shakespeare had a point of view. Socialist Realism means putting this point of view in addition to getting the historical perspective of Shakespeare's times.



The Finale of Popov's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Petruchio and Katherine are conflicting temperaments which adjust themselves for the compromise of marriage.



The tapestries, which change with each scene, keep the rich life of the Italian Renaissance in perspective behind the play.

Biondello is a boy who runs errands. He runs them badly, because everything by the way is so interesting, from a game to a street-row. Hence he is constantly having his ears pulled; but his smile is so open and attractive that nobody can be angry with him for long. And when he is interested in a job, he does it efficiently. He is devoted to Lucentio, and it was his secret terror that he would not be allowed to accompany him to Padua. In Padua, when Lucentio and Tranio test their disguises on him, he soon tumbles to the idea, and when they leave the stage, he stands looking up at Bianca's balcony, wondering what sort of a woman this can be that can so intrigue his beloved master. Then he grins with pleasure at this exciting life, of which he has often dreamed, and which Padua now seems to be offering him.

The servants are used very prettily for Bianca's assignation with Lucentio. Biondello enters, dressed in a cloak, with a sword. Approaching Baptista's house, and supposing nobody to be about, he gives a whistle. The front door opens and Pompey peers out suspiciously. Biondello pretends to be a passer-by and marches off up the street. Pompey goes in again; and Biondello comes back. He makes sure the coast is clear, and whistles again. This time the nurse appears on the balcony. She signs to Biondello and goes in to tell Bianca. Biondello runs off to fetch Lucentio. Lucentio serenades Bianca, who comes out on the balcony and at the end drops him her handkerchief as a pledge of her willingness to come. He goes off, calling her down to the garden. She nods agreement, and disappears. Biondello winks at the old nurse, who has stayed on the balcony throughout. They thank one another for all each has done to help their master and mistress to come together.

The romantic, idyllic passion of Lucentio and Bianca (who hardly know each other, but are desperately enamoured of their idea of each other) is witnessed by the new Katherine and the changing Petruchio. In their recently found wholeness and deep joy, Padua seems to them a weird place, with its hypocrites and mountebanks, servants and masters all mixed up, and almost everyone pretending to be someone else—like

a lot of children in a charade. And childish seem these ridiculous passions, and the highly poetic refined lyricism of Lucentio and Bianca. Petruchio and Katherine have grown up. Out of a false society where human values are twisted into bank accounts or bookish phrases they have become a man and a woman. Except for Grumio they are alone. There is no need to act to each other any more. Petruchio asks his Kate to kiss him; she is terribly in love with him and longing to do so, but is overcome with shyness. Playfully he pretends to start pretending again: "Why, then let's home again. Come, sirrah" (to Grumio) "let's away!" But Kate stops him. She falls into his arms, crying, "Nay, I will give thee a kiss. Now pray thee, love, stay." And so the mutual adjustment of temper by love is complete.

But Shakespeare has not yet finished his play; and he has one more trick up his sleeve to do it with. This is the difficult matter of Katherine's final speech at the banquet. The husbands decide to test their wives' obedience. In the original farce, this was just a colophon to point the moral for Christopher Sly. But Shakespeare has a better use for it, though his use has baffled many scholars as being in poor taste and more theatrical than natural. So indeed it is, when taken, as it generally is, at its face value.

When Lucentio sends for his wife (from the drawing-room back to the port and cigars, so to speak), she does not come. That is perfectly in character. Bianca's little idle Mayfair head is a wilful one, and she is not going to be ordered about by her doting husband. She intends to keep him hunting. So she doesn't do 'what isn't done': she stays where she is.

When Hortensio sends for his widow-wife, she does not come, either; and that also is in character. She is sitting in the drawing-room with two other women; she is a guy of a figure (see her on the extreme right of the lower picture facing p. 145); and she is not going to let them think she was so anxious to marry again that she took Hortensio on any terms he wanted.

When Petruchio sends for Katherine, speaking quietly and confidently, she comes at once. And that also is perfectly in

character, but not as a mean-spirited thing obliged to obey her lord's smallest command. She is very quick-witted. She has heard the orders of Lucentio and Hortensio. She knows exactly what is happening. And she appears in the dining-room with a smile on her face and complete trust in her man. So complete is their understanding that she does not turn a hair when he calmly tells her to take off her cap and trample on it. In fact, as she does so, she gives him a wink, that the others do not see.

Then she fetches in the self-centred, disobliging wives and delivers her homily to them. Dreary, patriarchal, and moralistic, if spoken as a Final Speech to Women in General, it becomes deliciously comic if, as it here was, directed at Bianca and her doting but puzzled 'lord, king, and governor,' Lucentio. It becomes truthful and pointed when it includes the provoked widow, 'peevish, sullen, sour.' And it provides a real motive for the new Petruchio to cry with all his heart in the pleasure of an admiring fellow-conspirator :

"Why! There's a wench! Come on, and kiss me, Kate!" and they do kiss, with such a robust goodwill that the love-lorn Lucentio mutters enviously about "harsh hearing when women are froward."

And finally, looking forward to a future which Katherine's realistic words have revealed to him, in which he, the romantic lover of fine words, must sink lower and lower into the miseries of matrimony with his beautiful shrew, knowing that it is the humanity of Petruchio which has made Katherine grow up, as he can never cause Bianca to do, he mumbles the phrase that I myself have often applied to the whole play until I came across Popov's interpretation,

"'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so." I cannot see that Popov's interpretation is in any way a straining or alteration of Shakespeare's text. On the contrary, it is based on a close study of it, and even the interludes are evolved from its demands. Popov's understanding of human nature and deep theatrical knowledge have only brought out the full life and truth which lie hidden in it. Such is his angle on the

duty of the producer. He is a man that has grown in stature with the growth of Socialistic Realism; and in dealing with one of his productions at full length and as closely as I have done, I hope I have shown better by illustration than any argument could do, what Socialist Realism is and how it works.

## CHAPTER XI

### Other New Men

THE régisseurs of the Soviet Union move round like English head masters. Unlike English head masters, though, they sometimes abandon the round and form their own institution. Moreover, unlike English head masters, they frequently go as guest for a single purpose to an institution other than their own, while still in charge of their own. It is no less difficult for the historian to get a correct picture of these than of the actors in the King's and Duke's companies at the Restoration.

Already in 1938 there were more than two thousand producers in the Union. In 1935 the Maly Theatre had, besides its Director Amaglobely and his deputy Daltsev (policy and administration generally), five of them at work, L. I. Volkov, A. D. Diky, L. M. Prozorovsky (all Honoured Artists), I. S. Platon (Honoured Art Worker), and K. P. Hohlov, with six assistants, Bernar, Bogachev, Kaminka, Nezhdanov, Smirnov, and Tolokin. Not all theatres have so large a staff; but there are something like 800 permanently established theatres<sup>1</sup> in the Union, so it is plainly impossible in this book to select more than a very tiny proportion for study.

Three have been chosen for special study: Radlov, Zavadsky, and Akimov—examples, but not all exemplary.

Sergey Radlov is a Leningrad man, who began his theatre career in 1911 as a young poet, engaged to write rhymed prologues to Spanish Renaissance comedies at the Antique Theatre, St. Petersburg, run by Yevreinov and others. In 1920, at the Theatre of People's Comedy, of which he was by then in charge, he produced five plays, four of which in the absence of any Revolutionary dramaturgy were on plots invented by himself: *The Benefactors of Versailles*, *The Prisoner*, *Love and Gold*, and *The Foster-child*. The fifth, *The Merry*

<sup>1</sup> Seven hundred and ninety in 1939. *The Soviet Theatre*: I. Moskvin (Moscow, 1939). For the meaning of the word 'theatre,' see footnote on p. 10 of the present book.

*Wives of Windsor*, in an indifferent translation and on a kind of Maddermarket stage, was an archaeological affair of which Radlov is now heartily and engagingly ashamed. Next year came Molière's *Médecin Malgré Lui*, the sets being by Hodasevich. In 1923 Radlov produced a Toller play, *Eugene the Unfortunate*, at the Leningrad Dramatic Theatre, with the rising star of Dmitriev to design the sets; and in the following year Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, at the Leningrad Theatre of Opera and Ballet. He stayed at this theatre to do Prokofiev's *Love for the Three Oranges* and Alban Berg's *Wozzek* in 1926, and then returned to the legitimate stage at the Leningrad State Academic Theatre (Alexandrinsky) for his first production of *Othello* in 1927. Back to the opera, next year, for *Boris Godunov*; and we then lose sight of him till 1932, when he produced *Oedipus Rex* at the Leningrad Sad Gosnandom,<sup>1</sup> and Rossini's *William Tell* at the Opera. Such activity did not go unrecognised, and in 1932 he is established in his own small studio-theatre in Leningrad, staffed almost entirely by young players only two or three years after graduation, where he produces Ibsen's *Ghosts*, a revue, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Evidently a man of versatile talent which is beginning to be demanded elsewhere, for in 1935 he not only produces *Othello* in his own little theatre, but makes the Moscow Jewish Theatre Goset famous all over the world for its *King Lear*, Tyshler being responsible for carrying into execution the remarkable sets; and in the same year prepares *Othello* for the Maly, Moscow.

One of his more recent productions was *Key to Berlin*, a slightly prophetic study of Russo-German relations during the Seven Years' War, in which the authors Finn and Guss showed how the Russians struck back at Frederick II. But in spite of his versatility, it is as a producer of Shakespeare that Radlov best expresses himself. His *King Lear* put the Goset on the right path after years of struggling toward a more concrete and realistic style. It is remarkable that the productions which have brought the Maly and the Goset to the fore of recent years as interpreters of Shakespeare are

<sup>1</sup> 'People's House.'

his productions, in spite of his lack of knowledge of the Jewish tongue in the latter case and the poor quality of the translation.<sup>1</sup> He is not so successful with other British authors. When he did Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* at the Lensoviet in 1940, the wit was very damp and the audience was not much amused, preferring to follow, with much attention, the situations and the plot. This may have been Radlov's intention, of course; but it would seem not so, because emphasis on the situations would mean accuracy in rendering the *byt* of the 'nineties, and according to a reliable critic<sup>2</sup> he missed the formal aristocratic atmosphere entertainingly captured by the Pushkin Theatre some years back (with Yuryev as Lord Chiltern), and gave a rather stuffy provincial one.

Radlov is a student of Shakespeare. His wife Anna Radlova is his translator. He has written an interesting essay on Producing Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, he says, was a realist but not a naturalist. Except for some splendid costumes, his stage was technically poor. (I presume he is referring to the public theatres only.) Radlov in 1921 tried to copy the stage circumstances of Shakespeare's time at the People's House in Leningrad—"an empty, emasculated, and pointless stylisation," and "small wonder," he adds, "that this was one of my worst Shakespearean productions."

Yet within these limits Shakespeare was a careful writer for the stage. Radlov finds that there is roughly the same structure in all his plays, and running roughly with our act-divisions.

- (1) Great tension.
- (2) Slackening of tension.
- (3) Tremendous flight of emotion.
- (4) Almost complete rest for the leading actor.
- (5) Final, decisive strokes.

<sup>1</sup> He gives us a pleasant picture of himself, Mikhoels, and the translator Galkin sitting for a couple of days and nights surrounded by dictionaries and variant readings. See *Наша работа над классиками*, by Akimov, Vinyer, Kroll, Radlov, V. N. Solovyov, and Tverskoy (Leningrad, 1936), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> L. Malyugin in *Teatr*, 1941, No. 4, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> *International Literature*, 1939, No. 6, pp. 49-58.

Thus, in our Act IV, Romeo is off the stage, Lear has only two short scenes, Hamlet rests after the Closet Scene, and so on.

He finds also that Shakespeare plays are like orchestral works. Tempestuous scenes alternate with quiet lyrical ones; single melodies alternate with crashing ensembles. Like a musician also, Shakespeare is a master of tempo; and the producer should respect his knowledge and stage-craft as carefully as a conductor goes by his score. Where Shakespeare has written 20 lines, 210 syllables of iambic pentameter, one ought not to draw these out to the space of time occupied by 30 or 35 lines. Similar attention should be paid to the difference in both tempo and texture between prose and verse, and between blank verse and rhyme.

Right or wrong, Radlov's principles are no mere whimsies. He shows a wide acquaintance with even those commentaries which he despises as false scholarship. Nor are his productions pedantic, though grounded on intellectual appreciation. His production of *Hamlet* at his own theatre in 1938 was a very human thing. He has a wide stage, and used it to group and isolate the characters as he wanted their loneliness or conformity stressed. Gigantic portraits on the walls of Dmitriev's sets, starting above head-height, and stretching upward almost out of sight, gave the crushing hypocrisy against which the human sympathies and honesty of Hamlet struggled in vain. So overwhelming was the weight of tradition and intrigue that Ophelia too was powerless to fight for her love. But the human beings that were the agents of this system were not dummies or slogans. Gertrude was an anxious mother; Claudius energetic, sagacious, not altogether a 'bad king'—for there must be something to justify Gertrude's attachment to him. Prokofiev wrote music in tune with this version—'somewhat aloof,' the critic said. But Radlov is never aloof.

"I have no right to stage Shakespeare," he writes,<sup>1</sup> "unless I picture to myself England of the Elizabethan period. Only a knowledge of history and sociology can help me to understand whom Shakespeare was for and whom he

<sup>1</sup> Наша работа, и т. д., p. 15.

was against, whom he loved and whom he hated; and to understand this not in general formulations that do not commit one to anything, but concretely in each given instance and each given play."

Until he came to the production of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, in the spring of 1934, he had looked on this play as a poem about beautiful and unearthly, romantic love, and passion much too idealised. But when he came to grips with it, he found it was a poem about a struggle for love, the struggle in a particular instance of two particular young people against a form of society that denied their right to love. Shakespeare's England being what it was—for Radlov insists that because of Shakespeare's sublime disregard of historical or geographical fact, it is the *locale* of the people that must be taken where this conflicts with the *locale* of the plot—Shakespeare's England being what it was, these young people were fighting for a free, new life against the old and constricted and decaying customs of feudal society. And Shakespeare was unmistakably on the side of the young and the new; and as unmistakably, and daringly, against the vested interests that sought to maintain the collapsing framework. Catastrophe destroyed the young lovers; but not before the values of their struggle—even against coincidence, due to the extremity of their position—had been established in a degree that moves us still.

A similar conflict, though seen from the other side, he found in *King Lear*—a production with which he had much trouble from scenic-artist and actors as well as from the translator, to such an extent that he nearly withdrew it at rehearsal. Here he spent the first act in establishing Lear as a happy, vigorous old man (or one who thinks he is happy) returning from the hunt, or joking with his devoted fool. In his comfortable court he does not realise that by partitioning his kingdom arbitrarily, at a whim, as super-autocrat, he has signed the death-warrant not only of himself but perhaps of his kingdom too. The terrible contrast (heightened by Radlov's stage methods) between this false dignity and the utter naked abasement of the Storm scene not only evokes

credible pity in the audience but is also the means by which Lear realises (though too late) the full meaning of what he has done—and been. Another characteristically violent contrast is that at the end of Act II, Scene ii, where, in the quiet moonlight in which Kent reads Cordelia's letter in the stocks and then unrebelliously falls asleep, trusting that, in this inhuman society which he cannot understand, fortune once more will turn her wheel,<sup>1</sup> suddenly the curtains close and across the fore-stage rushes Edgar, a hunted animal, whose only chance of salvation from this society is to turn into the least human of all humans—a lunatic beggar. Under this conception, too, the blinding of Gloucester becomes not excusable, but understandable. The fact that old Gloucester has been to Dover, as a potential aid to Lear, is a tremendous threat to the plans of Cornwall and Regan; and to render him immobile without actually taking his life is the temptation of the moment. It is fear, not diabolism, that rules Cornwall. Theatrically Radlov softens the horror, and adds to the realism of the scene (realism in regard to the habits of feudalism) by giving Gloucester's cry of horror and anguish to some of the ladies-in-waiting.

Again, the terrible scene on the heath—so tremendous that other producers have found it impossible to follow without a sense of anti-climax—was swiftly exalted and given reassurance by the noble trumpets and power of the Army of France: an intervention on the right side to save the threatened forces of youth and newness. For in Cordelia's honesty and courage there is more than the tale of Gorboduc. She is one who keeps her head when all around are trying to hit each other's off. She has a practical, unconventional outlook. At the risk of both Radlov and myself being misunderstood, I will say she is to the whim of Lear what Bacon was to the mediæval Church, or the Puritan merchant of the City of London to the official of the Jacobean Court.

“ Of course,” as Radlov says,<sup>2</sup> “ Shakespeare was writing

<sup>1</sup> The quiet of this scene was considered so important by Radlov that he always rehearsed it at night ‘after the show.’

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

not a political pamphlet, but a great poem about people old and new, about the new in those departing, and antique things in the new life."

Yuri Zavadsky was a pupil of Vahtangov. While still an actor at the Moscow Art Theatre (it will be remembered that Vahtangov's Theatre started as Studio III of the Moscow Art Theatre) he put in extra time as an occasional producer. He has a much lighter touch than Radlov, and though he faces always the reality of the piece he is producing, nevertheless usually insists less on depth than on grace and clarity—clarity by subtle contrast, not emptiness, and the grace that comes of power tempered with practice. Hence he demands that his actors have springiness and are concrete. Pointing and pace; not the imitation of life, but the bounce of it—he is naturally at his best with such things in comedy. He did not get what he wanted till he got his own company. In a Moscow suburb, from among the pupils he had been training, in 1927 he opened his own studio-theatre, seating 565, with de Musset's *No Trifling with Love*, and *A Simple Thing* by B. Lavrenyev. *The Devil's Disciple*, one of his most famous productions, gave more solidity to his outlook. But his faults still lie in the direction of a lightness that his company cannot always rise to. While running his little studio-theatre, he was still on the establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre as an actor, and also on that of the Central Theatre of the Red Army as a junior producer both before Popov and under him.

The company of the latter theatre cannot have given him the perfect material for his wants. His own company did not always do so, though in Vera Maretskaya, his leading lady, he has an actress quite in sympathy and at home with his ideas. Under his guidance she lifted his theatre to a quite new and more consistent level in *The Taming of the Shrew*; but this was after the entire institution had removed to Rostov-on-Don, where at the 'Gorky' Theatre it occupied better premises and a position of greater importance than a mere 'studio.'

During the interregnum at the Mossovet Theatre, before

he left Moscow, Zavadsky produced Goldoni's *La Locandiera* there, apparently importing some of his own company, as Maretskaya played the name-part, and very charmingly. But either the rest of the company lacked the necessary technique or Zavadsky was overcome by the demoralisation of his hosts, for the light hand seems to have decayed into mannerism in this instance, and both on the stage and in the auditorium the amusement was 'theatrical' and idle.

Maretskaya, however, scored a big success, and a bigger by her playing of Katherine at Rostov in 1940. Zavadsky's production of *The Shrew* owed nothing to Popov's. Popov cut the whole of Sly; Zavadsky retained it. He credited his strolling players with a high skill, so that they got lost in their parts, and there were two centres of reality. The conflict between Katherine and Petruchio was less passionate and more capricious. A less human importance weighed on them. They took each other at face value, and sparks flew, small, but sharp and burning. Love was not psychological; it played pranks in colour and rhythm—a sort of pastel rendering, like the light, multi-coloured No. 1 tabs of *La Locandiera*, with a design like a nosegay, which rose to reveal an inn, its wooden walls unstained, like a flower-basket. It was light classical music—Schubert to Popov's Beethoven.

But though the critics did not like *La Locandiera*, the audience loved its grace and sparkle, and in 1941 Zavadsky was back at the Mossvoiet, preparing the last play by Afinogenov, *Mashenka*.

Zavadsky is one of those who look for a new 'theatricality' inside Socialist Realism. But he gave a succinct account of the limitations of his search in a speech at a Producers' Conference reported *verbatim* in *Teatr*, 1941, No. 9, p. 123 *et seq.* He began by distinguishing theatricality (театральность) from theatricalism or staginess (театральщина). Theatricality is the essence of the theatre—the style in which theatrical behaviour differs from life. It is often puzzling to know what is the best direction for this style to take. Vahtangov, for instance, confessed to Zavadsky that he wanted his whole conception of *Hamlet* to be transmitted by the actor. Every

time he came to a decision, as to the style of this, it was a different one. He spent hours at rehearsal discoursing and demonstrating speech apparatus, the motion of the lips, to carry some particular detail, or the apparatus of the hands. Stanislavsky, on the other side, was afraid of the word ‘theatricality’ because he identified it with staginess; and when he was trying to get Batalov, a typically and incorrigibly *Russian* actor to be a Frenchman in Beaumarchais’ *Figaro*, he resisted all temptation to dictate outward methods and tricks, and tried to rouse his inner imagination. Now we all know, Zavadsky continued, that an experienced actor can read a part at sight. Associational memories come to his aid—what we call *clichés* (штампы)—that is, he guffaws, or weeps, or shows pleasure or indignation in a ‘general’ way, irrespective of the present situation or character. This is the actor’s technique. “A cliché,” said Vahtangov, “is the next-door neighbour of craftsmanship.”

But the real actor uses this technique for expressing something else, e.g. an old man’s psychology, the old-man theme he is playing, by means of old-man clichés of diction, voice-production, etc. Too many actors replace inspiration by arithmetic. Then the cliché begins to get an independent existence, and becomes a convention; according to which an actor can have all the technique in the world and yet not be an actor, and vice versa can make us believe in him and can move us, without these clichés. Stanislavsky’s aim, like Vahtangov’s, was to overcome this conventionality, this tendency to show off the actor’s points instead of revealing character. Zavadsky implied that he agreed with them. He ended with a sketch of his ideal theatre, which would best express the reality of Socialism. “When I think about my theatre-to-be, I represent it to myself as the theatre of the actor. A Spartan sort of platform-stage. A few characteristic details of some kind in any given play, classical or Soviet—a table, chair, etc. But chiefly, the actor. On him the production depends; and at him the audience looks. The artist will express himself in light, in the painting of motion, in a capricious graphic composition of man on the stage.

Music will be expressed chiefly in intonations, in the rhythm of speech and movement, and the actor's art got across to the audience by his skill."

Before this peroration, Zavadsky had referred twice to Akimov, another prominent producer of Soviet Realism, but a convinced opponent of Stanislavsky. Akimov once said in conversation with Zavadsky that the idea of a producer not imposing his style on his actors was tantamount to 'state religion.' And he referred to the Moscow Art Theatre as that 'kindergarten for mental defectives.'

This is quite understandable, since Akimov is primarily a painter, and instinctively a rebel painter—an independent. In his portraits, book-covers, woodcuts, line drawings, costume designs, and stage-sets he has passed through the whole style-range of the independent flouter of the middle-class market—impressionist, expressionist, abstracter, colourist, constructivist, symbol-maker. But at no time has he really abandoned himself to any of these theories. He was even independent of independence. At all times a skilful draughtsman, he has never been very far away from actuality. When he isolates an idea, he does not insulate it with a black intransigence like Graham Sutherland. He is concrete, pointed, inclusive. "Akimov 'produces' his pictures."<sup>1</sup> And so his stage-sets have always been easy to act in.

Although N. P. Akimov is a Leningrad man, and his work has been primarily that of a man of the Leningrad Theatre, he began his stage career in 1922 at the Children's Theatre in Harkov. The designs for this early work have not been preserved. The following year began his close association with the Leningrad producer Nikolay Petrov. But he was also soon in demand for musical comedy, operettas, and opera in other Leningrad theatres. From his wide range as a painter he selected styles appropriate to the 'revolutionary' treatment of the play or the theme. These varied immensely. From a constructivist set of ladders, ramps, and gigantic flywheels (*Mr. Muggeridge*, 1924, produced by Petrov), by way of a triumph of misplaced ingenuity for *Tartuffe* (1929, pro-

<sup>1</sup> A. A. Bartoshevich, „АКИМОВ“ (Leningrad, 1923), p. 25.

duced at the State Academic by Petrov and Solovyov) in which the actors played between the unscrewed joints of a huge exhaust pipe, under a gigantic headlamp topped by a small gantry, clarifying his ideas with a sort of selective realism (*Trouhadec's Wedding*, 1927, produced by Petrov and Hohlov), he led up to his favourite and most famous style in *Intrigue and Love* at the Vahtangov Theatre, Moscow—a production well known to students of Russian Theatre. Of this last, Akimov himself has written: “Behind the speech of the characters, we hear the tramp of hundreds of conscript feet, drum-tap and fife. We divine at the back of them the gloomy grey of their life, slappings of soldiers’ cheeks, dove-grey with cold, life held cheap, and over it all is a gloomy sky, rain without end and leaden.”<sup>1</sup> The set itself was a silver disc tilted at 45° from floor to flies, with a narrow acting area on the horizontal diameter. This disc was diversified with spires, turrets, an iron gateway, steps, etc. But a new quest for a new form can be traced through all these tendencies. It showed itself in a theatrical realism—a little trick of shutting off a concrete set within a circular or other-shaped proscenium frame. Sometimes this was a mere architectural (though not purely architectural) shape, as in Afinogenev’s *Fear* (1931, Petrov); sometimes it was formed by space and darkness; sometimes it was an integral part of the acting area—as in *Razлом—The Break* (Vahtangov Theatre, 1927), where the action is seen through a warship’s side. It is interesting that this production, the sets for which first drew attention to Akimov, was by Popov.

Akimov was the sworn enemy of ‘illusionism.’ He laid down three rules<sup>2</sup>: (1) If your stage is 20 metres deep, don’t try to deceive the audience into thinking it is 200. (2) Present your materials as they are. Let plywood stand for plywood and iron for iron. (3) Unmask your technique.

At the same time he avoided the mystical tendencies of some other anti-illusionists who “wanted to turn the 20 metres into 2 million.” His aim was to set the play. So in

<sup>1</sup> In a booklet quoted by Bartoshevich, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> In an unpublished article quoted by Bartoshevich, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

*Robespierre* (1931, Petrov and Solovyov; the author was the Soviet writer Raskolnikov) he wanted to show not the story of Robespierre's fall, but an analysis of the causes of it. For this he used a 'space stage'—a great flight of steps varied with cut-outs of old Paris—the silhouette of the guillotine, a street lantern, the Tuileries garden, locality being scarcely defined. A kind of cinema technique, and indeed Akimov has the stage artist's envy of the cinema. He had also a tremendous absorption in *things*—Shostakovich's spectacles dominate Akimov's portrait of his face—and regarded normal scene-changing as "doing violence to the materials."

Akimov used to refer to the 'assembling' of his sets—a phrase specially suitable to the engine-like *Tartuffe*. Here he wanted to express not the hypocrisy of religion in Molière's day, nor the family-life of Orgon's household, but the hypocrisy of religion in his own day, the imperialist missionaries, the ways of international Fascism, the whole "dirty crowd" being swept off into one of the pipe-apertures at the end.

Akimov was not a Socialist Realist. But he was, and is, a man of very decided views and character. Obviously more than a mere designer, he just as obviously could not go on indefinitely working for producers. He had to turn producer himself. This he did in 1932; with characteristic self-confidence tackling the most difficult of all plays first—*Hamlet*, in Lozinsky's translation, at the Vahtangov Theatre.

His object was to "rehabilitate the play's good name, separating it from putrescent 'Hamletism,' revivifying it, squashed as it is by its own tombstone of mysticism, to live on the Soviet stage."<sup>1</sup> Instead of a philosophical problem based on one central figure—the traditional attitude to the play since Goethe—he wanted the interplay of many living figures, a very different thing from the 'philosophical dirge' usually presented. Now this is what makes Akimov so interesting, and why we have considered his career as a designer in such detail. His own wrongheadedness sets him right. As soon as he has greater responsibilities to his actors

<sup>1</sup> Akimov, quoted by Bartoshevich, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

than merely to give them areas to act in, he changes. In his desire to oppose tradition, he discovers life. Previously he has turned people into symbols; now he wants to turn principles into people. And what sort of people? "We hope," he declared, "that the realism of Shakespeare, inadmissible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, will be valued by our audience in all its stupendous power"—and this realism, as Akimov saw it, was the story of the struggle of the Danish Prince Hamlet for his father's throne in the concrete conditions of the sixteenth century—a story with plenty of action and plenty of interesting characters.

This, of course, is the direction of Socialist Realism. How far any particular production progresses on that road is a matter of the character and understanding of the producer. And it must be admitted, Akimov did not get very far on this journey. Perhaps he was led astray by roadside sights or Revolutionary posters catching his pictorial eye. The great paunch of the bourgeois-ified Hamlet, the fast young lady Ophelia's "reprehensible addiction to spirituous liquor," the famous soliloquy delivered in an Elizabethan bar (and given a very 'concrete' application), the cretin behaviour of Claudius, the imbecile behaviour of Laertes—all these things, in a sense, were part of the struggle for the throne. But they were also part of Akimov's struggle to win his own throne—the throne of emotional truth, which permits laughter and happiness in the gloomiest of tragedies, and which had been usurped by the nineteenth-century pedants who split drama into comedy and tragedy with no room for an idea in the former and no room for a laugh in the latter. Or if Hamlet was allowed to laugh, it was bitterly—a sign of his self-chastisement strained to breaking-point.

Akimov was also trying to get away from the Hamlet whom Goethe, as he writes,<sup>1</sup> "co-opted Hamlet into the gallery of figures created by himself." He approached it fresh, having seen it seldom and studied it never; and he approached it with a stage-logic that certainly gave a new brilliance. Thus Ophelia was as much a spy as Rosencranz

<sup>1</sup> Наша работа, Akimov, p. 131.

and Guildenstern, and her madness was comic—as madness was comic to the Elizabethan playgoer, like drunks to us.<sup>1</sup> A new depth was given to Hamlet's reproaches to his mother by making Claudius very much younger than his dead brother—in his early thirties.

But this was the approach of a painter more than of a scholar, and Akimov admits that he would do a very different production if he did *Hamlet* again.<sup>2</sup>

Akimov, as a character, has much in common with Terence Gray; and the 'rehabilitation' of *Hamlet* much resembled Gray's 'rehabilitation' of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Cambridge Festival Theatre in 1932. There, in the Trial Scene, the Doge played yo-yo, and slept on into the Moonlight scene, while Portia 'dried' in her Mercy speech, and had to read from a portentously biblical collected-works; Tubal competed with Shylock at fishing old boots from the canal; Balthazar (who for reasons of casting was a woman) unzipped herself and went 'with all convenient speed' to the tranect in a bathing-dress, swimming; and Shylock crossed the stage at the curtain-call playing a very untuneful barrel-organ. It was excellent fooling, and designed simply to clear the play of the romantic moralisms that have barnacled upon it, and to restore its original quality of being a comedy. But whereas that limited Gray's production, Akimov was trying something more, he was trying to interpret the sixteenth century in terms that the Soviet audience, he thought, would most quickly appreciate—in terms of themselves. Where both producers came short was in disregarding Shakespeare's love and care for humanity. Shylock may start as a figure of fun; but he ends as a pitiful figure, not at all funny. And *Hamlet* is not the drama of outward things that was all Akimov's two years of preparation could see in it. A drama of outward things is very near a melodrama; and what would have been an impressive end—the arrival of Fortinbras, plumed and on a white horse

<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true, see Lucas's Edition of Webster, Vol. II, p. 181—though it is probable that such playgoers' amusement very soon gave way to pity in *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

<sup>2</sup> Наша работа, p. 165.

where the remains of the Danish court stand roped off, as at a boxing-ring, from the remains of their rulers—becomes a rather stagey ‘effect.’

Nevertheless, Akimov had a kind of Socialist-Realist idea in embryo. He saw as the cause of Hamlet’s inertia an inner conflict between “the young feudalist with a whole lot of conditioned reflexes about the loss of his throne,” and on the other side his self, as feudal figure, decayed by a humanist education.<sup>1</sup> In fact he had put himself on the right road, and vindicated the principle of Socialist Realism, even though against his will. He opened his own little ‘Experimental’ Theatre in Leningrad in 1934, and became Art Director of the Leningrad Comedy Theatre in 1936.

Since this time this theatre, with Akimov either as producer or scene-designer or general inspiration, has done a series of contrasting, but increasingly Socialist-Realist, productions.

*The Dog in the Manger* (1936) was a Lope de Vega comedy translated by Lozinsky. *A Big Family* by Finn (in the same year) was followed in 1937 by *The School for Scandal*—with a pure white background, against which all the characters moved rather unpleasantly, and Joseph Surface was as bad a roué as Charles.<sup>2</sup> Among other productions that year was an American tragic farce *Monday at Eight*, by Edna Ferber and George Kaufmann. This was done by Korf as a straight study of the decadent side of life in a capitalist State. It is noteworthy that Akimov did not produce this, but only designed its sets; nor did he attempt more than designs for Priestley’s *Dangerous Corner* (1939), which Kozintsev gave as a similar study in English middle-class life (which, indeed, Priestley intended), and as an illustration of the saying of Marx: “Only theft can save property; only blasphemy can save religion; only debauchery can save the family; and only disorder, order.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Akimov, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> In the Moscow Art Theatre production more recently, of which the décor was also designed by Akimov, the background was mostly some rather sly paintings of flowers. The mistake about the characters was avoided.

<sup>3</sup> Ленинградский Государственный театр комедии: сезон 1940–1941 (Leningrad, 1940), p. 30.

*Twelfth Night* (1938) was taken as pure comedy—that is, the characters were given their head. The sets, costumes, and manners were those of an English Elizabethan country-house, with the usual amenities for hunting and entertainment, including a good classical library in which even Feste seemed to have done some reading. But the nearness of the sea warned that this ‘Illyria’—closely bordering on Cloud-cuckoo-land—was all the same a country where Earls could be Merchant Adventurers, young people could be cast-away while voyaging for the betterment of their position, and pirates of the Elizabethan type could be friends of land-owners. A country, too, where the Puritans had not yet closed the theatres, though by their careerism and forcefulness they were quickly acquiring sanctions; and a country where the lovesickness of the principal man is still the subject of conversation among servants and sailors: for if Malvolio looks forward to Cromwell, Orsino and Sir Toby both look forward to Charles II—two sides of the English character, its diffidence in gentler things, its rough humour and serenity.

Akimov makes much, in his account of the play,<sup>1</sup> of the quality he calls *розыгрыш*, which he finds typically English. “No country,” he says, “in the course of hundreds of years has thrown away such a deal of energy on artful practical jokes carefully prepared with a purpose beforehand, as we see in Shakespeare’s compatriots. No other literature, no other way of life, is so saturated with *розыгрыш* as in England.” From the days when Erasmus wrote that young men who wanted to frighten a priest had been dressing up as apparitions, to Chesterton’s *Man Who Was Thursday*, where the circle of people impersonating each other is so complete that you lose the starting-point, there is a chain of *розыгрыш*, contests of wits, runnings of risks, that waste time and the job. It runs, according to Akimov, through our *быт*, our theatre, and our literature; and he quotes Fielding and Sheridan as evidence.

<sup>1</sup> Ленинградский Государственный театр комедии: Шекспир. Двенадцатая Ночь (Leningrad, 1938), pp. 26 *et seq.* The word *розыгрыш* means the attitude of mind which depends on luck at cards or in a lottery, the ability to win by being not-serious.

Whether or not this is true, it gives a kind of solidity to the gay spirits of his *Twelfth Night*, just as our curious idea that all Russians are mad gives a distinct though false atmosphere to our productions of Chekhov. It adds to the high spirits of the comedy, too. "This may have no point, but the English don't like point," is an excellent frame of mind for a comedian. And that is perhaps what Akimov wants most of all. His contribution is not great, but it is graceful. Irony, wit, delicacy, movement, what the Russians call *igrá*—these are the pastel shades of Akimov the producer. And often Akimov the designer gets in his way, and "the brilliance of the décor muffles the actors' voices."<sup>1</sup> He is still the *enfant terrible* of the Soviet stage, and his proposal to get away from the humanities and back to formalism at a Leningrad conference of producers in 1940 roused little enthusiasm. And he is still preoccupied with *things*. As one critic said of his production of Lope de Vega's *The Widow from Valencia* (1940), "Natural feelings are embarrassed. They love things. Remember the gleaming buttons, the wristbands, the fruits and the masks, the goblets and decanters."<sup>2</sup> And another<sup>3</sup>: "Akimov gives you a succession of colourful pictures, but weakens the plot by his ironical attitude to his heroes." He disregards the way Lope de Vega protested against the reactionary powers in Spain of his day, the way his heroine's love has to break the fetters of religion that bind her. He disregards the way Lope de Vega poured his passion for Doña Marta into the silly novel of Mateo Bandello which he was dramatising. Lope de Vega wrote in his heart's blood. "Through Akimov's production flows only a pink liqueur."<sup>4</sup>

In Synge's words, "Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all,

<sup>1</sup> V. Sukharevich in an amusing article called 'Akimov Talks to his Shadow,' *Teatr*, 1940, No. 7, pp. 102–4, referring mainly to a play called *The Shadow* by a Leningrad writer Eugène Schwartz, on a story by Hans Andersen. This, with *The Widow*, was seen by Moscow spectators when four Leningrad theatres paid a state visit there in 1940.

<sup>2</sup> A. Gurvich, *Teatr*, 1940, No. 12, pp. 80–3.

<sup>3</sup> B. Kolodyazhnaya, *Teatr*, 1941, No. 4, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Gurvich, *Ibid.*

the way I'll go romancing through a romping life-time from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day."

Akimov has the same root-fault as Tairov, and Meierhold, and several other 'formalist' producers. They do not trust their audience. They are willing and interested; they want to see the past in the light of the Marxian dialectic; but their brains are in front of their eyes. They want to show the past in the same light, but they are out of touch with the people to whom they would show it. They have not yet discovered that Communism means not the submission of the individual human's understanding to the community, but his liberation through it. They do not know that the poster-play is as dead as the anti-religious poster.

Of the other producers in the Central Theatres we can do little more than mention some names. There is A. D. Diky, for example, who reorganised the old Proletcult Theatre as the VTSPS in 1932, produced at the Theatre of the Revolution before Popov, worked at the Maly but while still on their books opened his own theatre-studio with the help of Basovsky in 1936, doing a Cervantes interlude, an Ostrovsky play, and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. There is Hmelev, of the Moscow Art Theatre, who produced an early *As You Like It* in a Robin Hood manner at the Yermolova Theatre, and opened his own little studio-theatre about the same time as Diky did. He specialises in Russian plays. There is F. N. Kaverin, producer and playwright, whose *Taming of Mr. Robinson* Tairov produced in 1934. He was the founder of the Maly Theatre-Studio in 1925, later independent under the title of the 'New Theatre,' where he also flirted with formalism for a time, but established himself as a real artist by his stern, colourful production of *Uriel Akosta*.<sup>1</sup> Solovyov, of Leningrad, Sudakov, of the Maly, Bersenyev, of the Lenkom Theatre, who staged *Cyrano de Bergerac* with Cyrano as the champion of human rights, Serafina Birman, a famous

<sup>1</sup> I do not know whether the Kaverin who produces at the Moscow Dramatic Theatre (the old 'Semperante' Theatre which Smyshlayev continued to run for years after its 'Improvisation' methods had been superseded by the appearance of Soviet Dramatists) is the same man, or is L. P. Kaverin, an actor of long standing there. Probably the latter.

actress who also produces, Shatzky, Bebutav—all are names carrying weight in their circles. And there are the youngest generation of all, who have not yet achieved positions, but are already making their names: young Yuri Polichinetsky, who produced *She Stoops to Conquer* at the Moscow Dramatic Theatre in a realistic but tasteful way, with perhaps the influence of Popov grinning in the features of a negro servant; and N. A. Korzhenevsky, one of Bersenyev's pupils in his production class at GITIS (the State Theatrical Institute), who did an Ostrovsky play at the Tashkent 'Gorky' (Russian) Theatre in 1940 while still a student; but having all the equipment of a fully fledged producer, won the respect of the company.

And that brings us to the characteristic feature of the new Soviet producer. He does not any longer dictate either postures or interpretations to the actors. He steers the boat, respecting the abilities of his crew from mate to stoker. He has knowledge to correct the crew with a view to the voyage. He has authority, born of that knowledge, to plan all the interactions of the parts. But the days of the puppet-actor and the machine are gone. Nor is this at all surprising, for, as I write elsewhere, in a stylised production it is only when the actor breaks out and steals humanity that there is any performance at all.

The new Soviet Theatre, in short, affords the actor his power and skill as fully as it requires it; and the same is true of the new Soviet Dramaturgy, which we must now consider.

## CHAPTER XII

### New Writers and New Plays

NORRIS HOUGHTON, when he revisited Moscow in 1937, said he found a lamentable paucity of new plays and even suggested that a reason was to be found in an element of fear. In certain circles, among the wobblers, no doubt there was such an inhibiting element; but it was not general. Or if it was wider than the symptoms show, it soon passed; for since then there has been a spate of new plays, many of a very high quality.

In December 1940 a number of Stalin Prizes were awarded for outstanding work in Art and Literature during the previous six or seven years. They were large amounts of money. The first class received 100,000 rubles; the second, 50,000. Each carries with it a new title, that of 'Laureate of the Stalin Award.' In the Playwriting Section there were three first-class prizes: to Trenyev, for the revised version of *Lyubov Yarovaya*, staged in 1937; to Korneichuk, for the plays *Platon Krechet* and *Bogdan Hmelnitsky*, staged in 1936 and 1939; and to Pogodin, for *The Man with the Gun*, staged in 1937. In the second class came the Azerbaijani poet Vurgun, for *Vagif* (1939), the Byelorussian Krapiva, for *He Who Laughs Last* (1939), and Solovyov, for *Field-Marshal Kutuzov* (1940).

There are quite two dozen prominent playwrights alive and productive today, apart from some forty or fifty minor ones whose work is limited either in interest (some sub-national themes) or as yet in quantity. Obviously, although there is plenty of material available, it is not possible here to consider more than a very few. Nor is it easy to classify them for reference, either in order of importance owing to the unevenness of the creative gift, or in age-groups owing to the Russian critics' disregard of dates.

Roughly, however, the best dramatists of today since the deaths of Gorky and Afinogenov are young men, the two

exceptions being Trenyev and Alexey Tolstoy,<sup>1</sup> who were beginning to be known as writers before the Revolution.

Konstantin Andreyevich Trenyev's first volume of short stories appeared in 1914. He seems to be a man of well over fifty, who wears a thick moustache and round flat glasses that make him resemble a rather fierce schoolmaster. He has a love of words, which makes his plays, as one critic says,<sup>2</sup> "not only seen but heard." He is a clear example of the literary man looking out from his study on the world, not a worker entering the theatre from the world.

It was not till 1925 that Trenyev found that world sufficiently understandable and firm to build a play on; and even then it was past history that stirred him. He wrote *The Pugachov Rebellion*, a vivid and passionate chronicle of the eighteenth-century peasant insurrection headed by the Cossack Yemilian Pugachov. His first attempt at a Soviet play was the Moscow Art Theatre's first attempt at a Soviet production. This theatre was not yet so fully at home in the new world as even the author was; and this has always been considered one of its few failures. But it set the theatre on an avenue that was to lead to the *Armoured Train* furore of 1927, and it established Trenyev as a contemporary dramatist. The next year he came forward in time. The writers of the middle 'twenties were finding a huge supply of literary and dramatic material of a contemporary kind in the stories of heroism and skill during the Civil Wars, which had scarcely ended. Trenyev was among the earliest with the original version of *Lyubov Yarovaya*, which was performed by the Maly Theatre.

In 1926 the Maly Theatre was no more at home in its new world than the Art Theatre was. Bewildered by packed houses of workers, clamouring for contemporary work from a theatre that had been supplying the middle classes with Gogol and Ostrovsky, the Maly found in Trenyev a man who

<sup>1</sup> Formerly Count Alexey Tolstoy (I believe, a courtesy title). There was another Count Alexey Tolstoy (1817-75) who wrote a famous trilogy of historical studies of three Tsars, the second of which, *Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich* (1868), was the play with which the Moscow Art Theatre opened in 1898.

<sup>2</sup> B. Mikhailov, in *Teatr*, 1941, No. 3, p. 67.

could maintain their dignity and at the same time thrill their new audience. After *Lyubov Yarovaya* came *The Wife*, and another play whose title seems to mean *A Clear Log*, and, more recently (1937), *On the Banks of the Neva*, which, as its title partly implies, shows events in a Petrograd mill in 1917. In this last play the figure of Lenin appeared twice on the stage, but the principal character had a touch of poetry about him. Though commander of a detachment of Red Guards, he used to take a book of verse with him to political meetings. The bourgeois characters, as was then still the fashion in some playwriting quarters, were made practically caricatures.

But, as is usual, Trenyev's 'works' were not confined to any one theatre. Hohlov, for instance, did *The Wife* at the Grand Theatre, Leningrad, in January 1929, on a set by Akimov that was partly constructivist, partly pure slum. Zavadsky did a Trenyev play called „Опыт“ (*Experience* or *The Experiment*) at his little Leningrad studio. The Central Theatre for Young Spectators performed *Schoolboys*—a play about the 1905 Revolution seen through the eyes of those who, like the author, were young at the time; and the Moscow Theatre for Young Spectators did another play of his, *Summer Lightning*, both in 1936.

But his most popular work has always been *Lyubov Yarovaya*, not only in the Central Theatres, but in scores of towns and villages in Russia, and in the capitals of most of the republics in the Union.

In 1936 Trenyev re-wrote this play, which was produced at the Moscow Art Theatre early the following year, in its new form, five Acts instead of four, and with much deeper significance.

Like most Soviet plays it has a large number of defined characters—twenty-six, not counting supers and small parts, and is episodic in form; but unlike most, it has only six scenes. Lyubov herself is a progressive and intelligent school-teacher, whose husband, Lieutenant Yarovoy, is missing on the German front. In the course of the Civil War she plays an active, brave, and shrewd part on the side of the people, but dis-

covers when the White Army advances and occupies her town that her husband is still alive and though hitherto a Socialist Revolutionary, as she also has been, is now working for the Whites. Through an exciting series of incidents, moves, and counter-moves, bluff, disguise, rescue, theft of documents, warning of a Red counter-attack during a White 'Ball in aid of the Wounded,' through all the hurly-burly chesswork of a civil war when both sides are in the dark and anyone may be a traitor, Lyubov is faced with the choice of betraying her husband, whom she has loved deeply, or betraying herself and her comrades. This conflict is expressed dramatically—that is, in action—which leads up to her final resolution to cast away all she has loved in the past, as her captured (and unworthy) husband is led off to execution.

But this is by no means the only thread in the cloth. In the second version, much of the detective-story melodrama has brightened and deepened into human fullness—on both sides. The typist Panova, for example, who is a foil to Lyubov, hates the Reds, but hates the Whites just as deeply, though she sides with the latter for the sake of her 'position.' She is of little importance to the plot, but is carved so much 'in the round' that it is plain she respects the Commissar Koshkin and envies Lyubov's integrity as much as she hates them both.

Similarly, the devil-may-care sailor Shvandya, generous, cheerful, so enthusiastic for the Revolution that he is continually in trouble (much to his liking), has been a model for several stage-sailors since his first appearance; and with him goes in the mind the pitiable Pikalov (another minor part, but one of Trenyev's most admired creations)—a peasant in a soldier's greatcoat, dulled by years of neglect, exhausted by years at the front, longing for his miserable home, unable even to smile. Between them, these two have become classics of character representing the new and the old Russia. For it is not mere fidelity that makes a play great in the Soviet Union, or anywhere else. It is that classic ability to preserve the specific truth and fix it in relation to the general law—which is rare in all generations—so that neither its accuracy nor its place can be altered ever again.

Trenyev may not have this ability as Shakespeare or Molière had it. It is always hard to assess a contemporary. But he has something not unlike it; and trusting to this, he throws aside a number of aids to reality which some of our West-end realists insist on as necessities. His are not 'well-made' plays. He never explains why such and such a character ought to be appearing. If he wants them, he just brings them on. War-time conditions have now accustomed us to such Shakespearean meetings in daily life. They are the essence (welcome or unwelcome) of civil war.

Trenyev is not a great innovator, but for having set the two foremost Moscow theatres on the right road he has a claim to be called a god-father of the Soviet Theatre. He is in his prime, and his newest play, *Anna Luchinina*, shortly to appear, which is said to have a contemporary theme, ought to be interesting.

Count Alexey Tolstoy the younger, whose *Peter the First* we have already mentioned, is best known—apart from an adaptation of *Pinocchio* called *The Golden Key* (in which the puppet-boy is enticed by the wicked Karabass-Barabass, who has captured him, to give up his golden key, but—aided by the yells of the audience—stoutly refuses), and a not very distinguished play *The Campaign with the Fourteen Powers*—for *The Path to Victory*, produced at the Vahtangov Theatre. In this appeared not only Lenin, but Stalin; and together, at work, active, vital figures, not merely aspects of historical people. But, according to the critical Gurvich,<sup>1</sup> though Stalin is well portrayed, the author has not succeeded in a wholly satisfying portrait of Lenin.

Since 1937 the work of a young man who began life as a journalist has developed to a high degree: this is Nikolay Fedorovich Pogodin, one of the great names of Soviet Dramaturgy—now. But it was not always so, though his impish humour, his almost clownlike tendency to farce, have always made his plays popular. His first attempt, some thirteen years ago, a play characteristic of the author in its

<sup>1</sup> In an article on the 'Figure of Lenin in Soviet Dramaturgy,' *Teatr*, 1940, No. 1, pp. 10–25.

title, *Impertinence*, was accepted and put into rehearsal by the Moscow Art Theatre. It never reached performance, but it showed Pogodin that he could write for the stage—as he has not stopped doing ever since.

Of his next four plays, *Poem of an Axe*, *Tempo*, *Snow*, and *My Friend*, the first and last were produced by Popov at the Theatre of the Revolution in the early 'thirties; *Tempo* was done at the Vahtangov, and other plays at MOSPS and the Theatre of Satire. All these four titled plays were so full of humour and kindness that they consolidated Pogodin's place among the new humanists and won him a big following. But his humanism was intellectual, his love and optimism were in the head; as if he were an optimist from the feeling he ought to be. These plays were naïve and a little superficial, though scarcely to the degree ascribed by Gurvich,<sup>1</sup> a critic with high standards but an unduly sarcastic style. Already we see the interest in the rehabilitation of the outcast and traitors which was to bring him world-wide fame in *Aristocrats*. Already he was fascinated by the psychology of the enemy of the people. And undoubtedly his belief in the possibility of their conversion was so rapid, perhaps so ill-considered, that when acted out it often turned into pure symbolism. And though all four are what may be called 'actuality' plays, one feels the author knew plenty about his facts but little about his persons. *Poem of an Axe* deals chiefly with an Asiatic blacksmith who has stumbled on a method of making a steel that is rustless, unbreakable, and harder and more pliable than any yet known; he has made a pair of tongs out of it, which have been stolen; and meanwhile he has forgotten how he made it. *Tempo* is practically a sketch of the actual story of the building of the Stalingrad tractor plant, and the American engineer in the play corresponds to an actual person; but hardly a character has anything deeper than the life of a newspaper interview. *My Friend* concerns an oil king and a Soviet citizen who much resembles him; and the obvious political dangers are scarcely avoided at all.

<sup>1</sup> „Три Драматурга“ (Moscow, 1936). The other dramatists considered are Olyesha and Kirshon.

Lastly, in *Snow* we see the vague outlines of figures to be clearer defined in another play—a deserter, a saboteur, a man convicted of taking bribes, a malcontent, a thief—engaged in an expedition to the heights of Daghestan. They undergo a change of heart which for the miraculous approaches a much more famous transfiguration, on another mountain, with Pogodin himself as a sort of ‘father-confessor.’<sup>1</sup>

As a dramatist, Pogodin had not yet discovered what Gurvich calls “the process in which each present moment grows out of the conflict preceding it.”<sup>2</sup> Nor did *Aristocrats* fully explore this process, though its production at the Vahtangov Theatre in 1934, and still more that by Ohlopkov in the same year at his Krasnya Pressnaya Theatre, made the author famous outside Russia. *Aristocrats* is by no means Pogodin’s best play. Although it is more probable than those before it, its fulcrum—the conversion of criminals into good citizens anxious to complete the digging of the White Sea-Baltic Canal—is hypothetical, and a weakness ascribed by many who saw it in London not to the hasty methods, but to the nationality, of the author.

Pogodin has an almost Irish irresponsibility. Like Shaw, he has an undeveloped sense of humour, which, geared to a fine sense and mechanism of the stage, drives him down short and comic cuts for the sake of a good laugh. For this reason he is dear to the Russian audience. For this reason also he is unstable; if he lived in Britain he would be either a buffoon like Shaw or a cynic like Maugham. Living where he does, with a deep love for his people, his instability leads him into a light-hearted desertion of them, since in these plays all the characters are more types than men. This cannot be said of *The Man with the Gun*, a play about Lenin, first produced at the Vahtangov Theatre in 1937 as part of the celebrations of the twentieth year of the Revolution. This play is worth studying in detail, as it is remarkable not only in itself, but for the astonishing development of the author’s understand-

<sup>1</sup> Gurvich. I have not read these plays, but accept Gurvich’s facts as correct, on the grounds that otherwise they would not have been published and sold abroad.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

ing shown in it, and his new ability to make a character unfold and blossom in the course of the play. Pogodin himself admits that the character of the Bolshevik Chibisov is not alive, but that Shadrin's progress to consciousness was due to the fact that the author "carried him about in his bosom."

The action takes place in October 1917. Ivan Shadrin, a young peasant, is with other conscripts in the trenches. One shell-shocked soldier sits silent throughout the scene; another raves in a fever. Misery and depression. Shadrin has applied for leave, expects to get it, as his sister is in the service of his Captain's family in Petersburg. One of the soldiers is reading aloud, an article by Lenin in the illegitimate *Soldier's Truth* newspaper. They all agree that the article speaks the truth. The Captain arrives and discovers what they have been reading. He cancels Shadrin's leave. An enemy shell thereupon kills the Captain.

Meanwhile in the Captain's relations' house (his brother-in-law is a millionaire) Shadrin's wife has come to visit Shadrin's sister, the Shadrin farm having become practically unworkable. The servants are looking for a missing cat—symptom of the importance of small things in a rich household in war-time. The Captain's sister, mistress of the household, makes enquiries of the other servants about a man called Chibisov who is courting Shadrin's sister. He is said to be a Bolshevik. The unpleasant small boy wants to get credit for finding the cat, to curry favour with his rich old granny. Whispers of the arrogant behaviour of the 'Bolsheviks.' Arrival of a 'young General' with the news that Kerensky has disappeared; there is a crisis in the city; and the Captain has been killed.

The third scene in the Vahtangov production had a magnificent Neva-side night setting in the best of Rabinovich manners. A huge front-door and railings set at an angle, the silhouette of a cruiser beyond, and the skyline of buildings on the opposite bank. Shadrin, arriving fully armed from the front, to see his sister, is refused entrance by the janitor. While debating what to do next, he is approached

by Chibisov, though both are at first mutually suspicious. They smoke and decide they can get into the house—which they succeed in doing by a trick, in spite of the janitor.

In a room in the mansion used as an office the various capitalist friends of the millionaire are met to discuss how imminent trouble can be checked. They decide to receive a German emissary "to save the Russian State." The millionaire has just produced him, when Shadrin and Chibisov walk in with rifles loaded and appropriate the entire building "by order of the Revolutionary Military Committee."

The servants are now confronted with a choice of sides. The two soldiers line them up in the servants' hall, considerately giving the old woman a chair. Miss Fish, the English governess (a stock figure from many continental farces—with the inevitable monocle), in this play comes to life as a political figure. Being, like most of her class, politically quite uneducated, she is allowed to go, as she can do very little damage to anybody, anywhere. Shadrin's sister is willing to lend him money to allow him and his wife to return to their farm, as he is longing to do. But Chibisov recruits him for the Revolution, and the two soldiers make for Smolny.

The second act takes place in the Smolny Institute. In the ex-sixth-form room Revolutionary soldiers are eating, reading, or sleeping. Shadrin talks to them. He knows so little of what is going on that they take him for a provocateur, but with the help of some sailors his character is cleared; he reads and much approves the decree of October 26 abolishing private ownership in land, and goes off to find some tea.

In the corridor there are more soldiers, but nobody takes any notice of him, except a brisk little bald-headed man with a neat beard, whom he stops. This little chap is plainly very busy, but has time for a word of kindly interest, encouragement, and gentle humour, before telling the unknown soldier where to find some tea, and passing on. Shadrin is greatly taken with him, and only when a sailor tells him does he realise that this is Lenin, the brain behind it all.

This little gem of a scene was the first portion to be written, and took under half an hour to write.<sup>1</sup> Boris Shchukin, who played Lenin at the Vahtangov Theatre, made a tremendous hit in this scene for the authenticity of his acting—carrying his head a little on one side, and very simply asking, “Missing your tea, eh ?”

With ‘Lenin at the Helm,’ though, the author had much more trouble. This scene took a month and a half to write, and was re-written thirteen times. It is a full-length study of Lenin in action, showing many sides of his character. Adverbial stage directions are rare, as indeed they are throughout the play; tone and tempo being imposed by the dialogue itself—an indication of the increased skill of the author and his self-confidence in a scene of great challenge and responsibility for any Soviet dramatist.

The framework of the scene is a series of interviews, the perspective being focussed at the opening with a message received by a sailor-telephonist, that the Red Commander at Tsarskoye-Selo has been seen leaving in a car for the enemy’s lines. This is reported to the inner room where Lenin is in conference. A party of worker-agitators arrives, saying that Cossack patrols have been observed near Tsarskoye-Selo, and asking to be given transport to go to the front. The answer is that Lenin will go himself to the front.

Lenin in the midst of feverish activity enters and is accosted by a group of Mensheviks, who have been told he won’t see them. “Our hair stands on end,” says their spokesman to him, “when we think of tomorrow.” “It’s not a good thing for hair to stand on end,” says Lenin. “Hair should be kept flat”—and that is all they get from him.

A sailor pleads for transport to take ammunition to the Peter-and-Paul fortress. But there is none. Lenin instantly decides to organise Petersburg teamsters. He returns to his conference.

Shadrin is put in charge of a company. Lenin goes off to the front after further interviews.

<sup>1</sup> Pogodin, in an article on the writing of the play, *International Literature*, 1938, No. 7, pp. 65–72.

In this short space of time the audience is shown Lenin's quiet charm, self-possession, quick decision, imperturbability, politeness, sarcasm, clarity of mind; and humour. This last, which might have been so dangerous for Pogodin, shows how the dramatist has developed his self-control. "Excuse me," says a newly-made Commissar to Lenin, "but I don't understand at all. I've been made a Commissar. What am I to do?"

Lenin (*gaily*): How should I know?

Com.: How's that? You don't know either?

Lenin: On my word I don't. I've never been a Commissar myself, and I've no idea what they do.

But in the next scene, which is a kind of epilogue to this, Pogodin shows us a more serious moment. Pogodin has never been in danger of rhetorical writing. His dialogue is always that of everyday speech; but few authors could have resisted as he has done the temptation of a flight or two in a soliloquy by Lenin at the test-moment of the October Revolution. Yet in this scene, where Lenin is alone in his study, he merely makes two telephone calls, one to the editor of *Pravda*, asking for writers who can write simply about the heroic experiences of ordinary people, and the other to Stalin, praising his draft declaration of the rights of the nationalities within the old Empire as being understandable to everyone, the Kirghiz, the Kabardinian, the Chuvash. He is not going to bed, and will expect Stalin. "I've given up regular hours," he explains, and rings off. His sleepless nights have been pointed by his having thrown his overcoat on the sofa, and prepared to relax on it at the beginning of the scene—suddenly remembering that, on the contrary, there is much to be done before he does.

In this play we are not given Lenin and Stalin together; but the second act ends with a Crowd scene showing the ebb and flow of popular feeling within these great events and outside the lives of the individuals. On the steps of the Smolny Institute, Shadrin's wife and sister are looking for him and Chibisov. Mensheviks of the Railwaymen's Executive Committee threaten to run no trains if the Bolsheviks con-

tinue their crazy plans. Nobody heeds them. A peasant arrives with 805 signatures from his township supporting Lenin. An officer in disguise tries to get into the Institute, but is unmasked by a sailor and led off amid curses. Stalin comes out and has a talk with Shadrin on his way to the front with his men. They march off.

The two scenes of the third and last act are laid at the front. The side of the Petersburg road. Shadrin, Chibisov, and a 'lieutenant' (from the Office scene) organise plans of action. A captured White scout is given a letter to take back with him—"You damn fools, what are you fighting for?"—written by Shadrin. They decide to negotiate with the enemy's ranks; they will separate, to reach more ears. Shadrin objects that he has never made a speech in his life, but is persuaded, and admits that he can be fluent about Lenin.

Shadrin reaches the Whites' line and is talking to the men, who are inclined to listen, till an officer comes up and puts him under arrest. After the officer goes, the soldiers gather round to hear about Lenin. Some want to go over. A young Bolshevik arrives saying that if their commanders are not released immediately, the Reds will open fire; and hands over a copy of the Decree on Land. The Whites' soldiers arrive, and start ripping off their imperial shoulder-straps. In a short finale, Lenin, at the Smolny, addresses a crowd of Red Guards, sailors, and townsfolk. "People are saying," he ends, "that we needn't be afraid of the Man with the Gun, because he is defending the working people."<sup>1</sup>

This was in fact taken from a Lenin speech at the Second Congress of Soviets. Before the play was produced, a cer-

<sup>1</sup> "Permit me to relate an incident that occurred to me. I was in the train on the Finnish railway, and I overheard a conversation between several Finns and an old woman. I could not take part in the conversation because I cannot speak Finnish. But one of the Finns turned to me and said: 'Do you know the curious thing this old woman said? She said, "Now there is no need to fear the man with the gun. I was in the woods one day and I met a man with a gun, and instead of taking the firewood I had collected from me, he helped me to collect some more."'"—Lenin in a Report on the Activities of the Council of Peoples' Commissars, delivered to the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets, January 24 (11), 1918. *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1936), Vol. VII, p. 273.

tain manager objected that the finale should contain at least a five-minute speech. Pogodin replied: "A five-minute speech in the theatre?—Funeral march!"

Pogodin studied four dozen books about Lenin, including memoirs by his closest friends, and spent hours in the Lenin Museum. But all this summer-long study told him less than a fifteen-page pamphlet by Stalin, he records. He deliberately avoided an 'imitation,' so as to avoid caricature; but found little idiosyncrasies of speech like 'Eh?' at the end of a question, in Lenin's letters.

It is obvious, I hope, from this sketchy account, that Pogodin's stage production of Lenin looks true and lives. But it must also be obvious that it has its limitations. It is a close-up of Lenin—Lenin the friend of the soldier and peasant, Lenin the wise guide. And as such it was at once widely popular—widely in every sense, for within a couple of years it had been performed in eleven republics from Rostov-on-Don to Buryat-Mongolia. But Lenin of the deep thought and the wide plan, Lenin the Dreamer, is quite absent. And Pogodin set out to create this Lenin in a second play.

This was *Kremlin Chimes*, recently produced (March 1942) by the Moscow Art Theatre. The full text is not available, and there is no account of its Moscow production as yet; but it is possible to appraise the chief features of it from accounts of the productions in Grosny, Harkov, Stalingrad, Yaroslav, Daghestan, and elsewhere. Unfortunately several versions seem to be current simultaneously.

The different facets of Lenin seen in the previous play were all on the same side; in the second, more than one side is shown, beautifully cut, if still without revealing the whole brilliance and uniqueness of the stone.

*Kremlin Chimes* opens in a wood near a lake. A huntsman, a sailor, and a bell-ringer are discussing Lenin in tones of deep respect and affection. Lenin himself does not appear till the second scene,<sup>1</sup> then he is wearing a cartridge belt over his short fur jacket and carries a rifle. He is on a shooting

<sup>1</sup> In the Kirov Regional Theatre, Lenin did come on, without speaking, at the end of the scene, looking at nobody, busy with his new idea.

holiday. He enters the peasant's hut with familiarity, as if he knew it well; he jokes with the women about his lack of success that day, and plays, though a little absently, with a small girl who is not in the least shy of him, and doesn't know him for the man everyone is calling so brilliant and inspiring, while even the pious cottager Anna prays God to bless him.

This is Lenin the Friend of the previous play, but we soon see another side. On his holiday he has had the dream of the electrification of all the Soviet Union. "We must look forward and dream. Yes, dream, comrades, with faith in ourselves, with the will to dream, when there is no obstacle in yourself to the realisation of the dream, when with your own hands you can create life from the dream, and the life made by you is the dream of the superb, happy, colourful thoughts of mankind. Nothing, nobody, must wait."

But the dream is first tested by actuality. Lenin is seen approaching all kinds of humanity—and dealing with each kind differently. Tramway track-workers outside the Kremlin, engaged on their job at night ("For what other power would they stay working all night for a miserable slice of bread ?"); a sailor rambling about in love, staring at the stars ("If I see stars without a telescope—yes! If I don't, no!")—to him Lenin is firmer, clarifying his personal problem, but leading him to other problems—"With our people, it's possible to dream, to presume"—and raising his vision of the colossal electrification scheme. With Zabelin, the non-Revolutionary electrical engineer who asks flippantly, "But really, have Soviets any significance ?" and stands in the street auctioning matches, he is cunning, and in the end contemptuous but always seeing him as a 'Soviet person' in embryo and gradually working on him until he inspires him with the will to co-operate. With the old comic clock-maker, who is to alter the Kremlin chimes, he is charming, whimsical, poetic, passing from warm laughter to a hint that it is not only a clock he will be setting, but a nation-wide mechanism; and this amplified (but not symbolic) meaning brings his interview with the old clock-maker on a higher

plane than the purely 'romantic' interview with Shadrin in the Smolny corridor.

Actual figures like Stalin and Dzerzhinsky appear; and so does H. G. Wells—a conceited, intolerant, sceptical little H. G. Wells in a faithfully reproduced as well as dramatic interview which did in fact take place.<sup>1</sup> Here Lenin starts with polite reserve toward the inquisitive foreigner, is soon put on his guard when he realises the individualist that sits before him, becomes ironical, begins to be repelled, and laughs outright when Wells says he is preparing to write an exposé of Marx. At Lenin's confident laugh little Wells loses his tact. "Marx irritates me," he announces. Lenin can no longer be polite. Repulsion changes to sarcasm, and sarcasm to anger; and he ends the interview abruptly.

Finally, in these Garrick's-rounds of character, we must include his pain at hearing an old woman screaming at the Bolsheviks for their alleged crimes, which shows him sharply how he and his comrades have been travestied before their countrymen.

Plainly it is an excellent acting play; plainly it is a deeper study of Lenin by an intelligence much more responsive and more responsible than that which created *The Man with the Gun*. And plainly the Soviet attitude to a historical figure is a much more actual, immediate, and fuller thing than that of the authors of *Abraham Lincoln* and *Richard of Bordeaux*.

This realistic but respectful impersonation on the live stage of one of the greatest of the world's figures within the lifetime of people who knew him goes to the very heart of Socialist Realism in both its aspects; as an uncompromising truthfulness about the past, and as a factor in the education of the worker-audience in the spirit of Socialism. It is one way in which the new Soviet Theatre is unique in theatrical history. And it should be noted that not only the recently dead, but the living, great men also are to be seen on the Soviet stage, such as Stalin himself.

Further, so great is the theatre-urge inside Socialist Realism that critics are kept busy comparing the perform-

<sup>1</sup> Hewlett Johnson: *The Socialist Sixth of the World* (London, 1939), pp. 180-1.

ances of the many actors who have played Lenin since Shchukin daringly, and modestly, 'created' the part at the Vahtangov Theatre. Thus in Pogodin's plays alone up to 1939 there are detailed comparisons between the following interpreters of the part: Shein of Sverdlovsk, Sofranov (Gorky Theatre, Leningrad) and Altus (Lenkom), Kramov at Harkov, Svetlov at Chelyabinsk, Abramov at Kalinin, Shtraukh at the Theatre of the Revolution, Kolobayev in the Kirov Regional Theatre, Buchma playing in a Ukrainian version, Vasadze and Gomelauri giving two interpretations in Georgia, and so on. Not all, of course, are perfect. Brodsky in Zavadsky's production at Rostov-on-Don was considered a failure. Nor are the younger theatres' interpretations neglected, as at Kursk, Smolensk, Omsk.

This does not include those who played the part in other plays, nor all those who played the part in films. And when it is remembered that under the requirements of truthfulness is to be included physical truth such as that of voice, stature, and even head-structure (to bear lifelike and astonishing portraits in make-up by theatre artists), it is plain that the new Soviet Theatre is as well equipped with actors as it is daring.

The subject of the living, or recently living, figure of great Socialists on the stage is one of great importance and fascination. It cannot fully be dealt with here or yet. Other actors and other intelligences must be allowed to work on it. Plainly Pogodin has not yet compassed the whole of Lenin; perhaps no playwright ever will; though doubtless the forthcoming Moscow Art Theatre production of his play will give us more than has yet been expressed in it.

There are other plays by Pogodin—*Santa Lucia*, produced at the Ohlopkov Realistic Theatre, *Silver Hollow* (or *Silver Cascade*), a study of the Red Army in a Far Eastern outpost, mingling personal concern with military care much appreciated in the Red Army Theatre, and *Gioconda*, about a rest-home for collective farmers, in preparation a year or two back by the Theatre of Satire. But none of these touches either of the Lenin plays for popularity in the theatre and

frequency of argument about them in Press or conference hall. Pogodin is a young man, with a long list behind him. Whether he fulfils his immense promise or not, he will have a long list of interesting plays to come.

Early accounts of the Ukrainian Alexander Evdokimovich Korneichuk<sup>1</sup> seem to make him an infant marvel among playwrights. When still a boy he joined the Young Communist League, and showed remarkable abilities in affairs of real life as well as of the stage. A year or two ago he was elected a member of the Supreme Soviet of Socialist Ukraine, for Tulchinsky District; and also—a far greater honour and responsibility—a member of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. for Zvenigorod. And he is still a young man, with large passionate eyes.

Passion is the dominant colour of his plays. Most of his heroes live white-hot. Passion is also the chief defect of some of them. It leads him into romanticism. According to one account, *In the Steppes of the Ukraine*, for example, produced at the Franko Theatre in Kiev (1940), is a sort of contemporary *Romeo and Juliet*, with a good collective farmer and a bad individualistic farmer as schematic Montague and Capulet. The latter proposes (in a high Renaissance manner) to give his daughter Galya to a 'supply agent' who is swindling the farmers. The Montague-Capulet quarrel is a stage affair, and could in real life be settled by a little common sense. The fact that a party secretary is there, his motor-bike having broken down, only shows up the artificiality of the plot. Improbability follows. Marshal Budyonny is in the neighbourhood with his army on manoeuvres. One of the characters impersonates him, and persuades the rival parents to let the young people marry; but in the meantime the young people have eloped. But in the fourth act, Marshal Budyonny himself appears, *deus ex machina*, or king in a court play; and in the last act the party secretary, having spent the previous ones mostly in writing secret notes and sending telegrams, disgraces the villain and does the rival honour.

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced 'Kar-nay-chook,' with the stress on the final syllable.

Such is the aspect of the play given by a Soviet critic.<sup>1</sup> It may be that the inadequate treatment of the play in the Franko Theatre at Kiev made him exaggerate the weaknesses of the plot. But that there is another aspect of it is plain from the fact that Korneichuk, having been given a Stalin award of 100,000 rubles in 1940 for two earlier plays, won a further 50,000-ruble prize the next year for this very play.

In general, Korneichuk is realistic in his emotions and facts. Of his first plays, *On the Edge* and *Stony Island*, there is little information available. But among the early ones, *The Wreck of the Squadron* won the young author a great name and an award in an all-State competition. This was produced by Akimov at the Leningrad Dramatic Theatre in 1934 and done also by the contemporary Workers' Theatre in Moscow and District that year, having been previously produced at the Central Theatre of the Red Army. It was written when the new Soviet drama was beginning to bear fruit; and deals with the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and the decade following, in particular the annihilation of the warships of the Black Sea Fleet.

In 1937 he wrote *Truth*, a play in which the most moving scene is the introduction of a Ukrainian peasant to Lenin, begging to be admitted as a member of the Bolshevik party before he leaves for the front with his detachment. Besides Lenin, the figure of Dzerzhinsky is also shown on the stage—the action being divided between Ukraine and Petrograd. Kerensky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, are here 'exposed' as they were in Trenyev's *On the Banks of the Neva*.

In 1935, or thereabouts, Korneichuk became nation-famous with *Platon Krechet* (produced in the Moscow Art Theatre Filial), whose central figure is a fully contemporary surgeon "thinking like a philosopher and acting like a Bolshevik,"<sup>2</sup> with an active love for his fellows and a desire to prolong their lives by staving off old age. The interest is largely maintained by the girl Lida, who at first resents Platon Krechet as being the apparent cause of her father's

<sup>1</sup> A. Borshchagovsky, *Teatr*, 1940, No. 12, pp. 37-49.

<sup>2</sup> B. Fomenko, *Teatr*, 1941, No. 3, p. 19.

death, can't bear the "broken skulls, mutilated bodies, and terrible diseases with which he is concerned," but gradually comes to appreciate the greatness of this man with the cold eyes and the cruel fingers, and through him the purpose and opportunity of the life round her.

It had a big success, and (in translation) was the first play with which the Nalchik State Theatre in Kabardino-Balkaria enraptured this Caucasian people by a dramatic performance in their own tongue.

Even more successful was *Bogdan Hmelnitsky*, a historical work. The name part was a Ukrainian hero who led a rising of the people in 1648 against the Polish nobles who oppressed them. Korneichuk tried to give the people as much importance as the hero, however, and the smaller parts, in consequence, are lively portraits of Ukrainians today. This was produced at the Maly Theatre in 1939, and, as we have already said, was greeted by the Georgians, on production at Tbilisi the following year, as a reflection of their own efforts to expel their foreign oppressors.

*Bogdan Hmelnitsky* reasserted the young author's fame after a slightly inferior play, *The Banker*, produced at the Red Army Theatre in 1937. He is at present said to be working on a new play dealing with the present war. It is a sequel to *The Steppes of the Ukraine*, and said to contain the same characters. There is every reason to hope that real passions will remove the need to invent occasions for literary ones, and that *Partisans in the Steppes of Ukraine* will prove to be a present-day *Bogdan Hmelnitsky*.

The playwrights of the late 'twenties and early 'thirties have been silent, or insignificant, these last years. Afinogenov, whose career started brilliantly with *Fear* (in the late 'twenties), more or less ended with *Distant Point*—produced at the Vahtangov Theatre in 1934; shortly after which he fell under political suspicion. By 1940, however, he was beginning to clear himself, and finished a comedy, *Mashenka*, for Zavadsky to produce at the Mossoviet Theatre. This dealt with some of the lighter feelings of Soviet life. Afinogenov was killed by a bomb in an air-raid towards the end of 1941,

leaving his last play in a produceable condition. This is called *On the Eve*, and at the time of writing is to be produced at three theatres simultaneously: the Mossoviet Theatre (now playing in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan), the Maly (now at Chelyabinsk), and the 'Gorky' Theatre at Kuibyshev. It describes the fortunes of a foundry worker and his family in a cottage in a Moscow suburb, and the way they adjust themselves to the invasion, retreating in order to advance, 'scorching' their earth, and united, as few nations can be, in their will to victory.

I find little from Bill-Belotserkovsky except a study of Frontier Guards, *The Frontier*, in 1937. In the same year appeared Vsevolod Ivanov's *The Doves see the Cruisers Departing*, a play with an intriguing title, about events in the Far East, which does not seem to have made anything like the stir caused by his early *Armoured Train*. In 1940 the Central Theatre of the Red Army gave a production by Pildon and Voroshilov with Popov in the name-part of his new play *Parkhomenko*. The only extant account of this is an unfavourable review by the critic Kalashnikov. The play seems to have been taken from a novel and insufficiently compressed. It deals with a Civil War hero, makes the mistake of attributing to people in that period too much of a common plan. But it had some brilliant moments, and a superb production. A sword fight at the bridge at Lvov, with more than 100 men taking part, was apparently a triumph of realistic and exciting stage-craft. Katayev has given little but a stage version of his novel *I, Son of the Working People*, under the title *A Soldier Returns from the Front* (1939). In 1939 the Kamerny Theatre was preparing Vishnevsky's *The First Cavalry Army*; and the Vahtangov Theatre rehearsed Alexey Tolstoy's *The Campaign with the Fourteen Powers*. But in the main the early Soviet playwrights have contributed little recently. The reason is, I think, that they were too much concerned with the atmosphere of those Civil-War plots in which they made a corner. Few of them find the present day or the remoter past to their dramatic taste.

The younger writers, on the other hand, the new men,

prefer the present day or the remoter past. With communal hatred and melodramatic action removed, they can turn their attention to the individual and the deeper conflicts. It may be that some perspective of distance lends not so much enchantment as a richer comprehension, a kind of ripening in time, to the artist's view. Many of the great works of the stage—if not most of them—have been concerned with a conflict present to the dramatist's spirit, but one generation or more back in subject.

The link between the two periods is Leonid Leonov. Like Trenyev, he is an established writer who has taken to the Soviet Theatre. Gorky praised his literary gifts. But unlike Trenyev, though his first noteworthy play, *The Badgers*, was produced as early as 1926 (at the Vahtangov), he has not stayed in the Civil Wars for his subject-matter. His two most recent plays, *The Wolf* and *The Orchards of the Polovtsi*, have contemporary themes.

Like Trenyev, too, he is careful of words. His plays have as big a reputation in the hand as on the ear and eye; and, as well, he carves in the round. You can discuss and speculate on the motives of his people; but—as in all Socialist Realism—their personal problems are bound up with their general surroundings. Indeed this may be the criterion of direct, as opposed to sentimental, drama throughout the world.

*The Wolf* describes two conflicts in the Roshchin family. Gregory Roshchin has a wife, Xenia, with whom he has not lived for some years. Yelena, his *de facto* wife, has been engaged to Luka Sandukov, from whom she has been parted for some years also. Luka is anti-social, and the plot is his exposure and downfall. He is Xenia's brother.

This quadrilateral extension of a triangle drama has its social significance; for Yelena, in shaking off Luka, is also shaking off the old ways, and Gregory, in his new life with her, is eschewing not only Xenia, but the father of Xenia and Luka, an ex-priest, Lavrenti, more anti-Soviet than anyone. Politics are united with psychology.

Moreover, the psychology is impartial. In many ways,

the most interesting figure in the play is neither Gregory nor Yelena, but the old Lavrenti, a pauper in rags, unable to understand the new life, but rambling about among his various children, in whose happiness his own life now wholly consists. And the second most interesting figure is Luka, the morbid malcontent, gloomy, misanthropic, seeking power but too dispirited to earn it, longing to live—as he himself confesses—but from cowardice, not courage. He doesn't appear in the first half of the play, but his character is felt throughout. It is the day after which Yelena, whose love for him has died, will be free, according to their understanding.

Luka appears, although three years before, on the day fixed for their wedding-day, he fled, leaving her a laughing-stock. He is qualified as an engineer-mechanic, but is in fact a spy. Yelena soon suspects this; and works out a plan for his exposure. We are not told what this plan is. Indeed, the play has none of the usual spy-play tricks, so popular a few years ago, though there are one or two incidents with a revolver and a stolen cigarette-case. It is character interest; the process by which Yelena confirms her suspicions; the contact of Luka and Lavrenti (by all accounts, a subtly-written scene); Luka's final admission to Yelena that he loathes the new life and mankind in general, and would rather be a lone wolf in the forest. The play ends dramatically with the reactions of Yelena, Xenia, and Luka himself when they come to arrest him, followed by Luka's attempt to escape along the roof, and his falling to death.

A similar, and as valuable, identification of politics with psychology is to be seen in *The Orchards of the Polovtsi*. The family conflicts and the social conflict are the same. Pylayev has returned to his native place, a failure, after eighteen years. He enters the Makkaveyev household, a man sunk so low that he attempts blackmail on the woman he had previously loved, Alexandra Ivanovna, Makkaveyev's wife. Makkaveyev knows about his wife's old affair, but this does not prevent Pylayev from spoiling the rich, clean atmosphere of the house with suspicion and mistrust—to his own satis-

faction. The crux of the play comes when Gregory gathers round him all his sons—except Vassily, who is away on a voyage. He is very proud of his fine sons, and treats them in home-made cider, drinking to “the health of posterity, as I hope they will drink to ours.” Whereupon Pylayev shows his true colours by muttering to the effect that they are an intrusion upon posterity, “and nobody can be a prophet.” The sons turn on him for being drunk except one, who sees it is pure spite; and from then on, Pylayev is revealed as more and more of a traitor and/or spy. He plays a dirty game, hinting about Alexandra’s chastity, and gloating over Vassily’s disgrace.

When the time comes for his arrest, the cringing tyke turns into a tiger, but that doesn’t save him. He is taken away to his fate. In many ways *The Orchards of the Polovtsi* seems a weaker play than *The Wolf*, but both show the trend of the new Soviet drama away from the schematic poster-plays about the Civil War to this remarkable fusion of fact and character, in which not only ‘Soviet persons’ like Yelena are carved in the round, but ‘enemies’ as well. There is no doubt of the author’s and the audience’s approval of the one and disapproval of the other, but both kinds are human.

The playwright Vladimir Alexandrovich Solovyov<sup>1</sup> is another who has come forward in the new line. Previously he had made stage versions of Dostoyevsky’s *The Insulted and Injured* and Chekhov’s *In the Ravine*, and had translated *Cyrano de Bergerac* for the Second Moscow Art Theatre. When Popov went to the Theatre of the Revolution, one of the first actuality plays he did there was Solovyov’s *Personal Life*, and, in 1934, *Friendship*. Solovyov, with Pogodin, was a pioneer of the non-Civil War play. His labours were crowned by a historical play, *Field-Marshal Kutuzov*, the work which won him a 50,000-ruble award at the end of 1940. In spite of the hero-title (which was an alteration, before the first night, from the original title *A.D. 1812*), the real hero of the play is not the Napoleonic War General Suvorov’s

<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with the Leningrad producer and actor V. N. Solovyov (see p. 166) nor with the Vladimir Solovyov, poet and critic, who died in 1900.

favourite pupil so much as the mass of the peasantry in the reign of Alexander I—oppressed, and without hope of release, but fighting for their oppressors out of pure devotion to their country.

As a rule, Solovyov writes for the Theatre of the Revolution, the Mossoviet, and Lenkom Theatres; but his biggest success so far has been this production by Ohlopkov at the Vah-tangov Theatre. He is at present engaged on a play called *A Citizen of Leningrad*, which is practically a stage portrait of the Soviet Union's musical genius Shostakovich, working on his Seventh or 'War' Symphony in beleaguered Leningrad, with moments off to do A.R.P. work.

Before the German invasion there had been some justified anxiety about the possibility of a new playwright's work ever reaching production, owing to the system of commissioning, and the natural tendency of all theatre managers, whether Soviet committees or London business men, to copy each other's successes. Solovyov has already been quoted as on contract—in a manner of speaking. Similarly, Gusyev (author of *Glory* and *Friendship*, both plays about the Red Army, the latter reported to be in rhyme) writes mainly for the Red Army Theatre, the Theatre of the Revolution, and the Moscow Operetta Theatre. Finn writes mainly for the Operetta Theatre, the Mossoviet, and the Theatre of Satire; he is another survival from the Civil-War Melodrama period, but in 1939 collaborated with another author in *Key to Berlin*. And this play was produced by Radlov in his Leningrad theatre.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy for a young author to begin his career, unless he is already an actor or in some other way inside the theatre. Good plays are seldom written by outsiders. Most of the great dramatists of the world have been men of the theatre, generally actors. A young author may have a good idea, but to make a play of it he must have a technical knowledge. But not every theatre committee is open-minded enough to give a young outsider a chance to acquire this. The usual procedure in the U.S.S.R. is for an author to submit a scenario. After discussion and criticism,

the committee, knowing his other work, then commissions him to prepare the script, which will probably be much modified by the author on rehearsal. But plainly if an author has no other work for the committee to know, his entry is going to be difficult.

Many young authors have resented this vicious circle; and the critic Alexandrov drew attention to it in 1941 in an article 'On the Repertoire of the Moscow Theatres.'<sup>1</sup> In the same year the great Jewish actor Mikhoels at a conference of producers deplored a dying literature in the drama of the day, due, he said, to the decree by which authors could not 'sell' their plays to specific theatres after publication, as any theatre then had a right to produce them. Consequently, plays tended not to be published.

A movement was on foot to remedy both these wrongs of authors new or old; but there is no doubt that in spite of them, good plays do get published, and young authors do get accepted.

In 1937, for instance, I saw at Ohlopkov's Realistic Theatre a topical play about a flight to the North Pole. The author, who had not written a play before, was called Vodopyanov, and by a curious coincidence, the possibility of which he had not been aware of when writing it, he was himself on a flight to the North Pole when it was produced. In fact, a performance was broadcast, so that he could hear it at the Pole. It was a light, but very pleasing, comedy, staged with some remarkable lighting effects.

There are others. O. Litovsky, for instance, whose moving and deep study of contemporary Europe *My Son* we have already spoken of; or Bahterev and Razumovsky, to say nothing of the dozens of new writers springing up in the various nationalities. As a conclusion to this very incomplete account of the new Soviet Dramaturgy, before the spate of war-plays begins, we might do worse than consider a work by a newcomer, Kron, who has also written a play for the Moscow Theatre for Young Spectators called *The Rifle*.

The title is *Depth Prospecting*; and it concerns, as many

<sup>1</sup> *Theatre*, 1941, No. 2, pp. 15-20.

Soviet plays do, a region in the East being opened up by Soviet enterprise. A barren region, Elu-Tape, vernacular for The Dead Valley. On a verandah stands Marina surveying the scene—a hot and hazy country where oil-boring has gone on four years without result. A fifth shaft is being sunk. It is called the Sara Shaft, after a child born in the community at the time. Everyone believes that oil is to be found there. The old geologist Moris is certain; so are the prospectors, the old master Yakovleyich and the young engineer Teimur. Even the nomad Gazanfar believes it so strongly that he sings impromptu songs, in the way of his people, about the Dead Valley blossoming and growing into the loveliest valley of all the South.

The works manager, Andrey Hetmanov, and Marina his wife, however, are not so confident. They feel he was sent on this thankless job through envy and intrigue; or if he does not put it that way, he takes it as a period of penance, to be worked out as soon as possible. This gives him a kind of hasty efficiency—he is vain, and self-centred; but if he finds the oil soon, he will be recalled soon, to something better, more worthy of him—though he never has found a job worthy of him; all his jobs he has considered temporary ones.

He is not much interested in other people, treating them as units, like a mob-orator. Not even in his wife, whom he does not see to be lonely, baffled, ‘without a place in life.’ No profession, no friends, no children. But he feels he is always in the right. He is encouraged, unwittingly, by Marina, who doesn’t want anything very specially, and makes little effort to get what she does want. She was a student at the same institute as Hetmanov, and married him from ‘calculation,’ not ‘for love.’ She was much more attracted by his friend Mayorov, another student. But with him life might have been ‘hard and restless.’ Hetmanov was a ‘set’ character; and so easier. She married him. They would not have children till they ‘got to Baku’—that was their ambition: Baku, position, importance. Five years ago! And now she just idles round a huggery-muggery flat in a desert, and her husband goes about in a dirty shirt; and

here comes Mayorov, and she suddenly realises what she has been doing with her life.

Marina knows she has always been in love with Mayorov, but she won't desert Hetmanov, thinking he might need her in a crisis. But her very virtue depresses her further; not now because she has no place in life, but because she distrusts herself and shrinks from life.

The energetic Mayorov has the opposite effect upon Margot, the commandant's wife. She has been a society belle in her day, and no inhibited one, either; but never anything more. Now on the threshold of old age, she has found everything empty and distasteful. Life was becoming horrible, in past, present, and future. But Mayorov inspires her to work. She begins to feel useful, and those around her see her rapidly turning into an honest, kind, and likeable person.

The chief engineer, Mekhti, is an epicure, an elderly *beau gargon*. Andrey finds him useful; or thinks he may, if things don't go too well. Mekhti's harmfulness to the enterprise is not shown blatantly, until the end, when he says quite simply that he is in fact an unchanged class enemy.

Gulam, Hetmanov's deputy, is a keen engineer; but Mekhti takes him in completely, and he behaves as if he were a fool. This is perfectly true to life. When Mekhti tells him his plans, he agrees to help him, and keeps all persons suspected of honest intentions away from the shaft. But when Mayorov appears and violently opposes Hetmanov's idea of closing down the shaft as the quest is hopeless, Gulam comes to his senses, and ends the play a much happier man than he has been for many months.

Such are the principal people. The plot, as will probably have been guessed, is a usual one. There are few Soviet plays that are static. Most have almost too much action; and this is like the rest. There are attempts at sabotage and so on. But the focus, as we already have seen, is passing from action to character. The theatrical conflicts of real, living individuals is made to express the most dramatic of conflicts—the Class War—a war that still goes on, even in the Soviet Union, against the relics of Capitalist civilisation and

outlook whether in Moscow or in the far places of Siberia. In this conflict, Soviet Drama has found a theme capable of infinite variation, immediate, true, vital. It can no longer be expressed in slogans and satirical types only. There is a place for these, too; but it is not the theatre. Life in the U.S.S.R. has taken on a new zest, a kind of Renaissance joy and unbounded interest in life. Жизнерадостность is a word continually in the Press; and a quality running through all their arts. 'The gladness of life,' whether it comes out of a release from cruelty and suffering, or is the earned reward and leisure after effort, or comes from a sense that the road you walk upon is your road, kept clean by your will, and that your sister who washes it down with a hosepipe is just as useful as your brother who may be a Commissar, and their children may exchange this relation and nobody think the less of either; whether it is that you cannot be otherwise than glad to live when you are building a new life, just as a new life seemed to be, and was, being built in the Renaissance; whether it is that this must be a matter for the whole people and not for a few, as it was when the new industrial world was being built by liberal exceptions; or whether it is simply the childlike excitement of two hundred million people approaching their historical adolescence—of this I cannot judge. But stylisation is not a style for such a people. Life is too strong to be forced into the imagination. Life makes each man and woman astoundingly and legitimately different from his neighbour. And such variation in orderliness has been the fundament of all good theatre since the days of Aeschylus.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A New Attitude to the Classics

THE Classics in the Russian Theatre may be divided in three: (1) Shakespeare, (2) European writers of the past other than Shakespeare, (3) Russian playwrights of the early and middle nineteenth century. Of the three categories it might almost be said that the first is the most important; but we will take them in reverse order.

Roughly, Russian Dramaturgy begins with Pushkin (1799–1837)—*Boris Godunov* (a Shakespearean drama of Russian mediaeval history) and a few more or less finished one-act plays. Pushkin had little contact with the theatre, and tends to be more literary than dramatic, in a Byronic way, but his prestige is even greater than that of Lermontov, his near contemporary (1814–41), who had a far greater knowledge of the stage, and whose *Masquerade* is a stage masterpiece of sophisticated romanticism. Yet a third writer, Griboyedov (1795–1829), who is known as the author of only one work, the ‘comedy’ *Woe from Wit* (or *Wit Works Woe*, or *The Misfortunes of Reason*), shows a third side of the romantic period—how the sublime becomes satirical when it looks at the littleness of the nobles and higher officials. Gogol (1809–52), a warm-hearted humorist and humanist of the next generation, with even closer theatrical ties than his predecessors, still has their romantic outlook, and his famous *Revizor* displays that curious combination of realism and exaggeration which is the mark of stage humour.

Ostrovsky (1823–86) was the first professional Russian dramatist with an immense output of realistic middle-class dramas and comedies, the clumsy titles of many of which are founded on Russian proverbial sayings, e.g. *A Bit of an Idiot in Every Wise Man*, or, *Not All Cream for the Cat*. Count Alexey Tolstoy the elder (1817–75) wrote a historical trilogy about three prominent Tsars. Count Leo Tolstoy’s *Power of*

*Darkness* and *Living Corpse* and other grim tragedies of his own day brought Russian realism to a high development, though stage versions of his two colossal novels made (without his approval) during his lifetime carried further that confusing process by which the writing of an important poem or story may win its author the reputation of being an important playwright. Turgenyev (1818-83), primarily a novelist, did at least with his play *A Month in the Country* open up territories which Chekhov among the moderns was to make specially his own.

In a way it is an encouraging thought that nearly all these great writers were so progressive in their ideas, humanitarian in their affections, and revolutionary in their (implied) aims, that their plays, according to the author's status, were either frowned upon, cut, or suppressed by the Tsar's officials. Few of them had the cunning of Shakespeare, who could write masterpieces that would have withered both the Lord Mayor of London and the Lord Chamberlain (had they understood), yet managed to preserve his head and his investments. Pushkin's poems, after involving his banishment from Court, were personally censored by Tsar Nicholas himself. Lermontov's first tragedy, *Spaniards*, was written in 1830 and at once suppressed. The ban on *Masquerade* was not removed till 1852; and his collected dramatic works were not published till 1880. Griboyedov's comedy circulated in manuscript for years.

It was not, of course, that such writers were agitating for a reformed world in the sense that they advocated the removal of the Emperor or the seizure of power by the masses. Many of them were aristocrats themselves, and had a natural liking for privilege and a cultured, if unearned, leisure. But their minds saw through the deceptions and round the pettiness and above the cruelties of their time; and their calls to a reformation went unheeded until a greater need of reformation arose. This had not occurred by the time their works achieved performance. Naturally enough, the comfortable heirs of the system they had criticised, not being disposed to cut their own throats, were amused by the witty

thrusts, appreciated the great visions, but did nothing about either. An attitude to the literature of the previous fifty years typical of the middle classes in Russia and outside it during the last half of the nineteenth century. The 'romantics,' they felt, had a vague, broad, rapturous *all-gemeinheit*, which was man in an *altitudo*, but with no feet on the ground. Accepting this as characteristic of the 'great' poets of the past, they proceeded to found their own art likewise—a second-hand, false, and sentimental art, untrue of their own, or indeed of any, time. In terms of the British stage (for short-cut guidance) *The Foresters* have no actuality, either as figures of Tennyson's day or as outlaws in Nottingham Forest in their own; whereas *The Cenci*, though conceived in terms of a foreign past and achieved in an idiom comparable with John Ford, has a very deep and powerful actuality in terms of Shelley's England.

But mankind, as I show elsewhere, has in all countries and through all fashions of style a continually white-hot desire for truth and a refusal to be caught by the dreams of its own mind. For all the vaunted 'glamour' of the stage, the stories of the nations are alike. No sooner does a stage fashion or convention establish itself, than it begins to seek a new way, a new truth, which destroys that convention, and establishes its own, inevitably to be destroyed by a newer way, a newer truth, the seeds of which it carries in its own body.

This infusion of opposites can be most clearly seen in the story of the Japanese theatre—perhaps the most highly 'stylised' of all. It is plain in the turning-over of fashions in the London theatre of the eighteenth century. Most often it is the work of a new mind, or group, entering a decaying style. Sometimes it is evolved by the very leader of the old style (Aeschylus).

Fifty years or perhaps more before *The Foresters* the theatre of today, which was to supplant the romantic theatre, was already feeling its way out of the womb of that romantic theatre. And similarly, in Moscow, truth broke out in Lermontov and Griboyedov, was suppressed by the contem-

porary Tsar, was thwarted and warped by later society, and had to wait for a bolder revolution than in England, to find the society that would approve. Even then, the new world was too hasty to value it correctly. If Meierhold's production of *Masquerade* before the Revolution was a mere cavorting with convention, his production of it in the early years of the new world short-circuited the natural order, and established the convention before the truth. In the long, philosophico-historical view this was why it was not acceptable.

The same may be said of Ostrovsky. He was neither a politician nor a sentimentalist. He pictured realistically the narrow, brutal middle class of his day with their insensate greed for money (*Crazy Money*); but with a greater pity for their victims than hatred of them (*The Girl without a Dowry*).

Indeed, if you compare an Ostrovsky heroine with one created by Wilkie Collins, who was Ostrovsky's almost exact contemporary (1824-89), you observe the difference between the British way of life and the Russian. Ostrovsky's heroine is compelled to conform to the bitter mercantile world around her; Collins's heroine takes the initiative herself, and, though powerless to change it, sweetens it a little. But you also observe the difference between the two authors. You admire Wilkie Collins's heroine, and sometimes you are sorry for her; but your emotion remains personal and ends with the last chapter. In Ostrovsky you come up against an almost divine pity, not only for this or that creature, but for all oppressed and bewildered and stunted women, which, as it stirs you more deeply at the time, also leaves a lasting effect on your mind.

In his last play, *The Storm*, Ostrovsky united the two themes: on the one hand the purity and desire for freedom of the younger generation, and on the other the religious bigotry which almost intentionally thrust that generation into 'sinful' but natural acts, so that it could vindicate itself by crushing them.

A play that has suffered more misinterpretation than any other Russian Classic. A play that does not, as has been assumed, satirise patriarchal Russia: the rod is wielded not

by a patriarch, but a mother-in-law of tragic dimensions, despotic, reactionary, and maliciously pious, in a household ridden by fraudulent beggars and drunken priests.<sup>1</sup> A play that does not, as was thought when it first appeared, show up the 'extremes' of bigotry, but the whole foundation of moral and social behaviour by which all alleviation or progress was controlled more rigidly than in the previous century in this country. A play in which the breaking of the storm was not romantic melodrama, as Meierhold made it in his 1916 production at the Alexandrinsky Theatre; nor symbolical mysticism, as Tairov assumed it in 1923-4—thereby ridiculing Ostrovsky as well as the written rules for running the household. It is a perfectly legitimate psychological lever, anticipated in design by the thunderclap in the first act, which releases in the young girl's soul all the superstitious terror that her surroundings have piled on her conscience, so that she hysterically confesses to her husband, and destroys the only ten days of happiness she has ever had.

In the nineteenth century the interest of this magnificent play was purely personal.<sup>2</sup> The tragedy was due to the play of character—the domination of the young husband by his mother, the (perhaps wicked, but understandable) wilfulness and desire for full life in his young wife, and so on. This was looking no further than noses; the extreme of realism. Hence the inter-connection of Ostrovsky with the Maly Theatre.

In the two Revolutionary productions mentioned above, persons mattered little. The surroundings counted for all. People merged into their surroundings like motionless owls into trees. This was cutting off noses: the extreme of

<sup>1</sup> As far as I am aware, this play is known to the British public only through a recent broadcast of part of it. Owing to necessities of length, almost the whole of the religious background, and at least one important fanatic, were cut.

<sup>2</sup> Pisarev, a 'liberal' critic who took a remarkable sociological view of all literature in the 1860's, missed the whole point of it. "Katarina," he wrote, "the Russian Ophelia, having committed a multitude of follies, throws herself into the water, and thereby commits her last and greatest folly." Pisarev rejected Pushkin's *Eugene Onyegin* on the grounds that its hero and heroine were representatives of a parasitic class and that Pushkin in describing them so lovingly was no better than they. He had an enormous influence on the writers of his time.

formulae. Hence these two versions were unsatisfactory. In 1933, Vinyer, a comparatively unknown producer, who had produced only one Russian Classic before, took it as the opening play for the new Leningrad Region Professional Workers' Union Theatre (LOSPS). He tried to express it in terms of a not yet mature Socialist Realism. Shklyayev's set will probably be familiar to many readers: a wooden bridge rearing up, over and down across the stage, with a kind of summer-house at its highest point, crowned with a rickety onion-spire, and a huge screen depicting the Volga beyond, with somewhat symbolic wooden fences abutting from the wings.

The three themes brought out were: (1) the obstinate suppression of new ideas; (2) the complete subordination of women not so much to their husbands (the husband here is a poor sot with no will of his own) as to what one might call an ultra-presbyterian principle of life; and (3) the conflict of the ordinary citizen with religious fanaticism (the easy-going Kuligin and the fanatic Feklusha). It was on this last theme that Socialist Realism failed. The nineteenth century made Feklusha a hysterical exception; Vinyer made her a cruel norm.

The play was done not entirely as Ostrovsky wrote it. Songs, verses of the poet Lomonosov, and pieces of dialogue from another Ostrovsky play, *The Warm Heart*, were written in. In short, the influence of Meierhold still lingered in Leningrad. Neither Ostrovsky nor the 1933 audience were trusted by the producer. To get a true historical view, the play had to be tampered with. In consequence, the view was warped.

In 1935 the Moscow Art Theatre produced it, and in this undoubtedly the balance of the work was restored: people as living people, making, as much as made by, the circumstances in which they live. In such a conception the personal tragedy is no less poignant, and the circumstances make it no less inevitable; indeed, both factors have more power by their interworking. But a perspective is given; and while we watch poor Katarina being driven to her doom, we

feel also that tremendous forces are at work, of which she is unaware, and that all these threads, not from mystical or supernatural causes, but from purely human ones, can form this pattern and no other. Drama here comes to have the correctness of great music, revealing itself organically, economically, compellingly, through little notes chosen with exactness by a clear and powerful intellect.

But more than this—we gain a historical view. These inevitable acts are not symbolic; these interesting, frightening, pitiful, admirable, detestable people are not ‘typical.’ The former are no more symbolic than are our own actions in choosing a flat to live in, or a trade to work at—though there is an element of the symbolic in everything everyone does. Nor are the latter more ‘typical’ than the majority of our friends or relatives—you can file people in categories because among so many millions some are bound to have likenesses; but they generally creep out of your files. Yet at the same time the perspective in which the stage-choice of acts and people places them, gives them a new meaning—a historical meaning, all the wider and more pungent because we know the people as intimately as our own friends and colleagues.

There is no doubt in my mind that this is as Ostrovsky, as all important writers, meant it. Their work was true to their own times. It is little disappointed men who write for eternity and not their own times. Great writers are of their own time, earnestly, passionately, even if their passion is sometimes more hatred than love. But their own times do not always see the truth of their writings. They seldom see the whole truth. (Critics belonging to the ‘This will never do’ school should not be blamed until you know all there is to know about them.) They never see the full importance of that truth.

That is left to a later age—in reaction against the former, or in triple or quadruple reaction down history. Only when the audience has a broader perspective can the view of the great playwright be vindicated. And then the broader or deeper truth becomes apparent, in degrees that

vary with the intellect and character of the producer bringing the figures of that truth back from the dead.

So it is that Socialist Realism, that the revolution of Socialism, turns over like a wheel, bringing out and reaffirming the old truths in a new guise, the old thoughts in a new understanding; and these in their turn are only new facets of the truth of tradition.

And this is true also in relation to times and countries that seem far off and long ago, though they are points in a historical process that still has influences on the new life of Socialism. The Soviet citizen wears those influences in his head quite as truly as he has a primeval monkey on the end of his spine or a hoof in his toe-nails. And Socialist Realism has just the same attitude to the Western European Classics as to the Russian ones. 'Western European Classics,' in the Soviet Union, mean primarily Shakespeare, whom the Russians and their allied nationalities have made more passionately and intimately their own than even the Germans before Hitler. But they do not neglect the classics of France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. Indeed, especially in the last, they have been fond of producing plays by Schiller and Lessing which we have tended to regard as literary and unactable today. We have already spoken of Akimov's décor for *Intrigue and Love* at the Vahtangov. *The Robbers* is another Schiller 'Sturm und Drang' product just as often staged in the Union.

The German romantics were rather more uncompromisingly romantic in their outlook than other nations. Schiller is nearer to Horace Walpole than to Lermontov, but has more pasteboard than either. Yet even they had a sharp, if oversized, historical blade. Their favourite theme was the end of feudalism and the beginning of a new and freer and more individual world. That their works should be popular in the Volga German Republic—an almost exclusively German land-island of people settled in the steppes as an example of industriousness by Catherine II—is easily understood from a cultural angle; as also is their popularity in Kiev, Ukrainians having many contacts with the true Teutonic culture. And

their popularity in stranger regions, like Armenia and Buryat-Mongolia, is easily understood too; for these places have suffered within living memory from a feudalism harsher than the German poets ever imagined.

The difference between Ioffe's presentation of *Intrigue and Love* at Kiev in 1933 and that seen by the poet in 1784, is that in the latter case the heroes were high-spirited heroes with beautiful souls, and in the former case they are real people of Schiller's day acting as such. Of course, the productions even in the Central Theatres do not always succeed. One critic observed of the actress playing the lead in the Lensoviet's *Mary Stuart* that she reminded him of Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*. This implies, I imagine, that she was under-playing the part, was relying on her looks more than her brains, and was abusing her technical ability, and (since in the U.S.S.R. criticism of the lead means criticism of the producer) that neither she nor the producer had the faintest glimmering of historical sense.

It might seem as if to the people of Buryat-Mongolia, Schiller, as a poet of a remote western subdivision of the white race at a curious moment of cultural fashion when artists pretended the past was more magical than the present, would need some explanation. But the 'romantic' tendency, the idealisation of the past, runs through all folk-lore. By studying Schiller's outlook, the tribes of Siberia can get a new light on their own arts. Hence the preparation and the explanation, no less careful in Ulan-Ude than in Moscow. We have already seen the very real significance to the people of this region found in *Tartuffe*, and the same is true of other Molière plays. Uzbekistan appreciates the humour of *Le Médecin Malgré Lui* quite as fully as that of Gogol's *The Wedding*. The children of Moscow laugh at *Le Malade Imaginaire*, because there are malingers and simpletons in every society and at any time of life. The soldiers and sailors, with their accessory fellow-workers of the Far East, knowing what it means to fight and work for other things than personal property, find in Molière a kindred soul; for although Molière lived in an age when personal possessions counted for every-

thing, when pedigrees were kept to ensure the keeping of the possessions together, and when success meant the handing of possessions from the rich and noble to the rich and worthy, yet he had this in the true perspective, and by showing up the extreme (*L'Avare*) was also showing up the norm.

Other French Classics have a similar treatment. Within the last few years Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* has been done in Georgia; Prosper Merimée's *Carmen* by the Gipsies; *Les Fourberies de Scapin* is a favourite in a Collective Farm Touring Theatre in the Moscow area; to say nothing of stage versions of classical novels by Balzac and Flaubert (e.g. *Pamela Giraud*, *Eugénie Grandet*), which though not, strictly speaking, stage Classics, yet spread an understanding of the masters of foreign literature in their spirit if not in their handiwork from Sverdlov Street to Kazakhstan.

Italy and Spain of the early and late Renaissance add their territories to the historical map. The high spirits of Goldoni we have already seen making audiences roar in almost every part of the Union. His robust humour and practical jokes are very close and comprehensible to the Soviet citizen—more so than to the British middle class, who even in University towns deplore his crudity with the wan comment that the day of the practical joke has passed. Perhaps it has. But the theatre in Britain will not live again until it has come back to our lives. When a made-up actor succeeds in entering and delivering an oration to the House of Lords, when a properly attested document orders the Ministry of (shall we say?) Endogamy and Memoranda to liquidate itself within two hours, the government of the country will in noway suffer, but we shall know the time is ripe for a British Goldoni, an English Synge, to arise.

The *Capa y Espada* plot, in which an adventurer (younger son of landowner, perhaps, or victim of some unscrupulous uncle, who has disbarred him from his rights) with his faithful servant, both in disguise, wins the heart of an heiress, and the servant that of the maid, the hero finds at the end that his own heritage is his after all—this may have little parallel in the Soviet Union. But as an expression of Lope de Vega's

time it is bound to be interesting, because Lope de Vega's time was an interesting one, and people had that new жизнерадостность which the Soviet people have today. A play that is full of action, if it is written with the full understanding and theatrical skill of a Lope de Vega, is a success in a country where people are doing things all the time, or discussing how to do things, or enjoying the benefits of the things they have done; and not just letting 'the proper people' do them, or delivering long orations about other people's sentiments.

Nor is the more serious side of the Spanish Theatre neglected. In the 1938 production of Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, as we have already said, at the Moscow Theatre of the Revolution, Laurencia was a reminder of Dolores Ibarruri—'La Pasionaria' of the Spanish Civil War. And *Don Quixote*, though not perhaps a stage Classic, had a serious meaning in the Vahtangov Theatre, apart from its humour and pathos; for it showed the uselessness of trying to live an old life in a new world.

So it is with the English Classics other than Shakespeare. *The School for Scandal*, produced by Gorchakov at the Moscow Art Theatre Filial at the end of 1940, was in no way parodied. There was no irony at Sheridan's expense, as there might have been in other theatres, ten years ago. *She Stoops to Conquer*, known in Russian as *The Night of Errors*, in the 1940-41 season at the Moscow Dramatic Theatre, was staged by the youthful Polichinetsky as a study in eighteenth-century provincial English life without in any way losing its entertainment value or sentimental charm.

*The Pickwick Club* and *Tom Sawyer* among literary Classics from the English tongue delight the children, though Soviet children have a livelier sense of what these are all about than I had when I used to read them over bread and salt-butter at supper-time as a small boy. To me Mr. Pickwick was a man who had never existed, while Tom Sawyer might have lived in the fields of my father's boyhood, apart from some curious habits like having to grease his Sunday shoes with tallow. To Soviet children, both are at the same time true people

and not true. Not true, in that they never existed; true, in that they are credible exaggerations of people who really did live in a certain time, at a certain place.

Socialist Realism in the production of the Classics, we see in this chapter, does not mean archaeology. It does not mean history for history's sake, nor the desertion of dramatic values. On the contrary, it means a heightened respect for a great writer's skill, and an acknowledgment that he wrote truth for his time. It means that his time, too, has a truth for today, for the audience of today. It means that by a theatrical miracle, while the new audience in its pride and awakened consciousness appraises the author's work as he meant it to be, there also appear on the stage the ghosts of the audience for whom he had to write.

## CHAPTER XIV

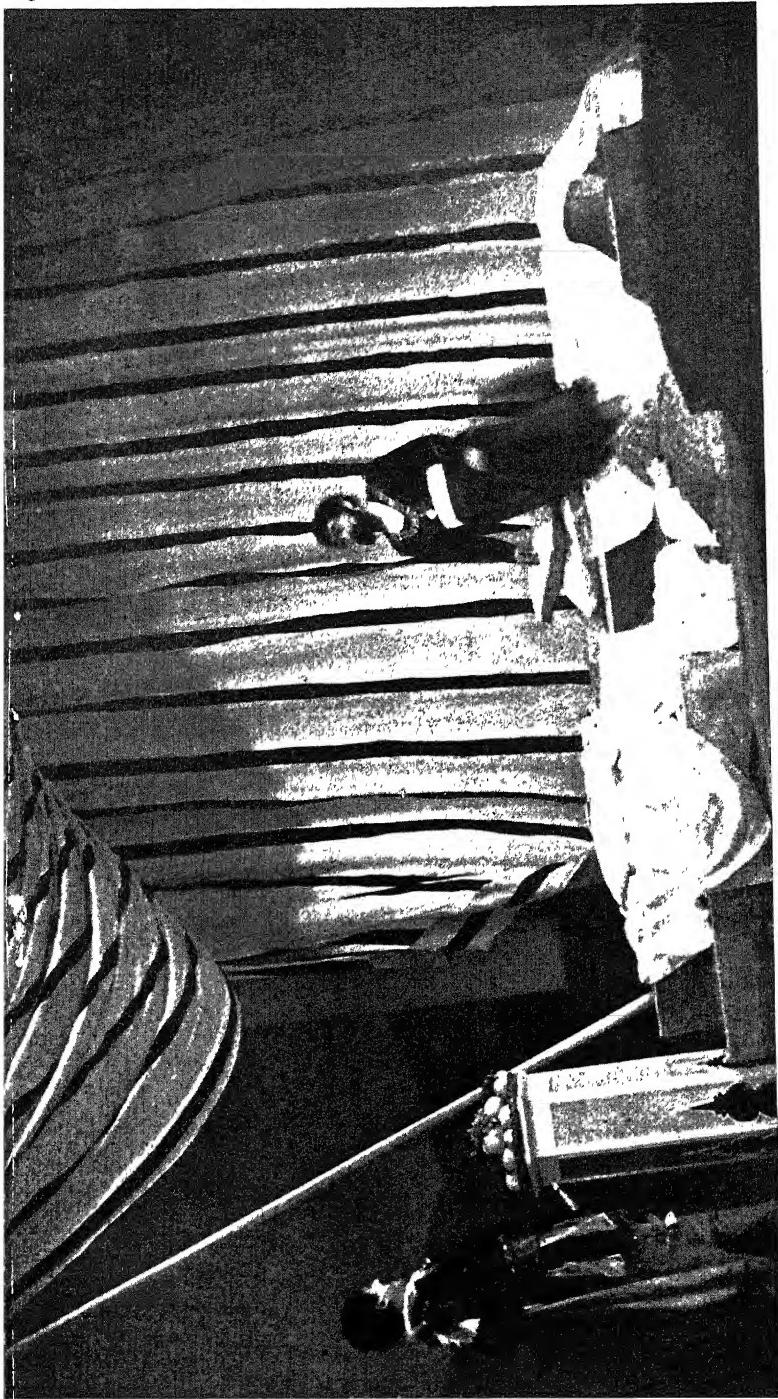
### Shakespeare on the Soviet Stage

In the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth, Shakespeare was known to the Russians in very inadequate and rhetorical translations which suffered from the style of the minor Russian poets of that time. And spiritually he was warped by the Goethe tradition of criticism, which saw him as a 'poetic' writer, dealing in vague generalisations about Ambition, Jealousy, Power, Love. In the early days of the Revolution, Lunacharsky pleaded for a Marxist view—Shakespeare as an ideologist of the feudal-aristocratic age; but the old translations could not bear this treatment, and the new ones, by Blok<sup>1</sup> and others, were schematic and false. It was largely due to such able and broadminded men as A. A. Smirnov, one of the ablest Shakespeare scholars of Russia, that a more human attitude was taken, and new, warm-blooded poets and poetesses began to create a thesaurus of Shakespeare translations faithful to both spirit and letter of English poetry. Smirnov's book *The Genius of Shakespeare*, published in 1934, has had a great influence on many prominent Soviet producers.

It will be instructive to follow the creation of one of these translations in some detail: the version of *Richard III* made by Anna Radlova, not in this case for her husband, but for Tverskoy to produce at the Grand Theatre, Leningrad. At the outset it should be noted that as all important Soviet productions take a couple of years to prepare, it is possible to have even the translation specially written. As no one director will have the same approach to the play as any other, there is an increasing body of versions, each faithful but all different.

The Leningrad Grand Theatre began preparations in

<sup>1</sup> The mystical poet of the savage years, at one time director of the Grand Theatre, Leningrad.



*Othello* in Tajikstan. Plausibly Iago begins to work on the trusting Moor. Socialist Realism translates Renaissance Venice into terms understood by twentieth-century Asia.



*Macbeth* at the Pushkin Theatre, Leningrad. "Never has the Scottish Baronial style of architecture been so cleverly yet so faithfully used to indicate the twisted and cruel nature of the civilisation that built and sheltered in it." The Macbeths were not exceptional. They behaved like everyone else.

1933. The first night took place in February 1935. First, a draft translation was prepared by Radlova, which was carefully studied with the help of Professors Gvozdev and Kudryartsev, the latter a specialist in the history of Great Britain. The producer was thus enabled to find his way through the thick tangle of arguments that has in places overgrown Shakespeare altogether. On the first of January, 1934, the play went into rehearsal—that is, a series of preliminary readings at which the general ‘shape’ of the treatment was established, and further complications discovered and dispersed. Meanwhile Smirnov had been working on a book about Shakespeare and his art, and this was taken as the theatre’s reference-book. Cuts were made—most Shakespearean plays being considered too long for the Soviet stage—not only in the lines, but in the scenes, and even in the characters. When looking for the scenes which would damage the play least by being excised, various considerations governed choice. It is considered in the Soviet Theatre that it is inartistic to have children acting with experienced actors in the same company in a serious play, their technique being inadequate, or if they are precocious in this respect, their understanding is sham. So all the children were cut. The murder of Clarence, the little scene where several minor characters are led out to execution (Act III, Scene iii) and other minor scenes that hold up the development of the main theme (e.g. the preparations for the murders of Hastings and Stanley) were all cut—not from squeamishness but for conciseness. Minor, confusing heraldic figures like Sir T. Vaughan, Sir James Blount, Sir Walter Herbert, Christopher Urswick, and the two Archbishops, disappeared altogether. The non-Shakespearean division into acts was wiped off, and the new version split into three parts of nineteen scenes, with only twenty-seven named characters. Radlova was careful to keep her version close to that of Shakespeare, rhymed where he rhymes, blank verse for blank verse, and tight prose for tight prose. A few songs were introduced, one sung by Richard himself. It ran, roughly:

"Heaven is dark above us;  
And dark the land is:  
God snores behind the clouds;  
And Satan dances.  
Beldame, a pint of ale, and dice:  
'Tis all I lack.  
We will all fade into the tomb;  
Haste you back to this room,  
Haste you back!"

The general theme of this production was that Shakespeare, looking back on the Middle Ages, seeing that the Wars of the Roses were the last struggle of the feudal chaos and demanded a strong unifying monarchy, nevertheless found in Richard of Gloucester the wrong person to unify it, from moral and other causes. Hence his suppression of any more enlightened or attractive side to Richard's character; and his ruthless squandering of characters to be butchered by Richard.

The general question of translating Shakespeare was discussed at a special all-Union conference of producers held in 1940 for the purpose. This conference followed one in 1939, at which a demand was made for more varied choice of Shakespeare plays, and preceded another in 1941 called to discuss the importance of knowing all there was to be known about Shakespeare's time and people, without a knowledge of which any 'interpretation' of the poet would be, as it often is in other countries, mere personal phantasy. At this last conference Professor Smirnov made a great impression by his theme that Shakespeare broke away from the cynical agnosticism of the Rococo period to assert truth and goodness as things attainable by personal effort, even if this might mean suffering.

In the Union Shakespeare has been translated into seventeen languages, Asiatic or otherwise. The Tadjik version of *Othello* is said to have successfully solved the blank-verse problem, there being no such convention in the Tadjik language. These non-Russian translations are done by the outstanding contemporary poets (many of whom are dramatists themselves) in each nation.

In Russia there are current no less than three new translations of *Hamlet*, of which the best, according to Professor

M. M. Morozov,<sup>1</sup> is that by the contemporary poet Boris Pasternak, who tries to keep the life and individuality of even minor characters in his rendering, and to follow Shakespeare's poetic use of the spoken idiom. Lozinsky's translation is more literary, and Anna Radlova's—in Morozov's view—on rather too grand and heroic a scale. Then there is the poetess Shchepkina-Kupernik, who is at her best in the comedies and more romantic plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*.

Up to 1939 the remote theatres had been diffident of handling any but the more familiar plays. But encouraged by the sympathetic attitude of the Central Theatres at the conference already mentioned, their producers went home with new ideas, followed in the working-out of them by active help from the centre. Morozov's Shakespeare Department of the All-Russian Theatre Society began to provide facilities. Lecturers, exhibitions, designs, books, were sent to any region that applied. Many of the more prominent regional theatres founded permanent museums and reference libraries on their premises, and supplied smaller theatres; as for example, until the German invasion, Rostov-on-Don, where the Theatre Society has a local branch, gave information and help to the theatre at Taganrog, two hours away by train. Amateurs as well as professionals avail themselves. In 1939 a club at the Caoutchouc Rubber Factory in Moscow presented *The Taming of the Shrew*, which early in 1941 reached its 100th performance. In the 1940–41 season a group at the Avia-khim Plant, Moscow (which had previously won admiration for its *Romeo and Juliet*), tackled that difficult play *Cymbeline*, not previously performed in the Soviet Union. They cut the Prison scene, and played the last two 'acts' as one, keeping in its entirety the wearisome finale with its eighteen *dénouements* each already known to the audience. But they held their audience throughout. Perhaps because of the patriotism of the heroes: for Soviet audiences are noisily but deeply patriotic. Or perhaps because of the personality of

<sup>1</sup> Another Shakespearean authority, but not to be confused with Professor P. O. Morozov, of a previous generation, author of several books on Theatrical History.

the heroine: for Soviet audiences are very human. The costumes, made by members of the club, were mixed Roman and Early British, and said to be historically correct.

This example of enterprise has been followed by a group of Medical Worker amateurs, and by a professional theatre in Moscow, which has the play in rehearsal.<sup>1</sup>

The popularity of individual Shakespeare works would make an interesting graph. Compare the seven Shakespeare plays most frequently produced in a three-year period ending 1938 with the seven most frequent since then.

*Othello* maintains an easy lead, 100 productions up to 1938, 143 in 1941. *Romeo and Juliet* rises in an exact parallel, from 35 to 78, but now has second place, for *Twelfth Night*, which was second, has dropped to sixth, from 36 to 25 productions. *Hamlet*, as self-confidence increases, rises from 23 productions and fifth place to 50 productions and third place; while *Much Ado About Nothing* with 39 productions instead of 19 rises from sixth to fourth.

*The Taming of the Shrew*, on the other hand, in spite of the fame of Popov's interpretation (or perhaps fewer producers are willing to compete?), with an actual rise of 14 productions has dropped one place. *The Merry Wives* (17 productions and seventh place in 1938) is now out of the table altogether, and *King Lear* replaces it, with 20 productions.

I cannot account for this remarkable lead by *Othello*. It is by no means a one-man play, and is easy to produce; but the high place of *Hamlet* disposes of these considerations. Also *Othello*'s popularity is wide. Georgia, Buryat-Mongolia, Tadzhikstan, Kirghizia, the Tatar Republic, and Soviet Armenia are some of the places where it is performed in the native tongue. To judge from photographs and critical accounts—by no means always favourable, for the Soviet critic takes himself very seriously—the standards are high.

The appeal of *Romeo and Juliet* is easily understood in a young community not so long ago racked by civil war. The Russian version by the poetess mentioned above has been heard recently in Voronezh (on the Upper Don), Yaroslavl

<sup>1</sup> I have not been able to identify the latter.

(north-east of Moscow), and Magnitogorsk, one of the new cities in the Urals. Popov's production at the Theatre of the Revolution is still in the Moscow repertoire, as Radlov's is in the Leningrad. The Dramatic Theatre at Voronezh is more romantic, with a particularly atmospheric Tomb scene upon which the spectator looks through an artificially broken roof and walls. Indeed the producer at this theatre, V. M. Bebutov, seems to be a man of original, if somewhat misguided, character. Several regional producers tend to romanticise not only Shakespeare, but all the Classics. Perhaps this is due to an overgreat joy and gusto in life, perhaps they have not worked out yet the technique of "viewing," in Gorky's words, "the doings of the present day from the height of the splendid aims the workers have set themselves." This Voronezh producer, at least, in his *Hamlet* of last season, was so rapturous with his thrills that the ghost appeared almost simultaneously in several places, as if it had walked through walls, and Hamlet gazed so fixedly at a full-length portrait of his father that the picture came to life.

*Hamlet* was in the repertoire last year as far apart as Archangel and Novosibirsk (in Western Siberia), and in rehearsal at Kursk, Stalingrad, and Tbilisi. It has been liked in Uzbekistan since 1938. In the Soviet Union, as elsewhere in the world, there is generally a '*Hamlet* controversy' raging. There is one intriguing view, which may be taken as a typically Soviet view. There are social themes in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy; there are social allusions in the 'Worms' speech; there are social values in the 'Graveyard' scene. In this aspect Hamlet is a 'politician without a political programme.' Prince he may be, but, like the last Crown Prince of Austro-Hungary, he has a social conscience. Admitted by those who take this sight of him, that every period takes a different one; and Hamlet as Rebel is visible only in revolutionary times and places. Then his duty is to fight for the throne, and his means are the usual ones, easy at hand, and likely to succeed. But he has no wish, no heart for it. The whole social structure is distaste-

ful to him. Therefore the throne goes to Fortinbras, who is prepared to fight for it, as a mediaeval or Renaissance prince had to do.

It may well be that this social view solves more problems than our individualist commentators have so far done. It may be that the elderly Nemirovich-Danchenko, with his assistant, Sahnovsky, will take this view in their production of Pasternak's version at the Moscow Art Theatre with B. N. Livanov as their Hamlet, announced for the end of last year, but still not quite ready. Professor Morozov has been their adviser throughout the two years of preparation, so that the human tradition of the Art Theatre in the present may have a historical and scientific correctness toward the past.

Radlov's *King Lear* at the Moscow State Jewish Theatre is still drawing large houses; about another *King Lear* at the Gorky Theatre, Leningrad, I have not been able to find much information. The Maly Theatre has it in rehearsal, and among the twenty new productions are those at Saratov and in Georgia.

Before *Twelfth Night* declines to nothing, it may be interesting to note what peoples it has amused. Among a host of new and suppressed-old plays in liberated Lvov, Dom-browski at the Grand City Theatre did a Polish version of it in 1939. No doubt there was something familiar about Malvolio, the seeming-pious agent of a leisured lady. Sir Toby Belch was to be seen strutting in Tbilisi, in a flowing Elizabethan costume. At the textile centre, Orekhovo-Zuyev, near Moscow, the ineffectual Sir Andrew Aguecheek postured below huge heraldic shields, on the stylish walls. At Rybinsk there was an 'architectural' set with realistic insets. At Tula a perspective background, reminiscent of the 'Comic' scene of Serlio, gave another kind of formality, but not formalism. The Moscow Operetta Theatre had the music of Shenshin. But perhaps the gayest of all these recent *Twelfth Nights* was Akimov's at the Leningrad Comedy Theatre. That must have been a delicious, mischievous, malicious experience, if Akimov was in true form.

Of the other Shakespeare works there were recently shown

*The Winter's Tale* in the Dramatic Theatre at the town of Gorky, produced by the septuagenarian Sobolshchikov-Sumarin, and *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Komsomol Theatre, Moscow. Some students of a dramatic school in Leningrad did pioneer work with *Love's Labour's Lost*—a comedy which, intelligently pruned and collated, is among Shakespeare's best entertainments and liveliest fancies, but which has hitherto been quite neglected in the Soviet Theatre—and their lead is being followed at the time of writing by the Leningrad Theatre of Drama and Comedy, where this will be another U.S.S.R. première, as will be the Shchepkina-Kupernik *Tempest* coming on at the same theatre. The Moscow Yermolova Theatre did *As You Like It* for the first time in the Union in 1940; Jaques was a gentle, disquieted man who sees the ugliness of the life round him but no way out, while Touchstone's sensitive heart bled at injustice. Yet how good it was, in spite of everything, to be alive, to be taking part in life, and to be laughing. Life without laughter would be unthinkable.

Life; the richness and variety of it; the length and beauty of it; the breadth and continuity of it, sweeping in wild contours from the open past to an open future; the lure of its problems, the everlasting discontent in its triumphs, the continually renewed growth of purpose inside its failures; the touch of person on person, the patterns they form and unfold, the ever-changing colour and shape of an individual, like a Highland hill; the coolness of shadow and the warmth of the sun, with no monotony in adversity or good fortune; the merciless freezing winter, and release from it, the merciless scorch of the sun, and release from that; but above all, man, man among men, and woman among women, and both among each other; men and women able to look back and comprehend all periods and all cultures, able to look forward and plan for the future, because they can examine the present with unprejudiced eyes; ordinary men and ordinary women, like you or me, making our own culture by the virtue of our own lives—that is the Soviet Theatre in relation to the Classics.

And perhaps no one production can earn a supreme title; but if any can, it might be *A Midsummer-night's Dream*. Alexey Popov staged this at the Theatre of the Red Army in 1940. He staged it royally, as "an anthem to man, and to love." He staged it lavishly on his magnificent stage; the cost is given as 300,000 rubles. This, as we well know, is no guarantee of quality. Costly electrics and whole ballet-schools of fairies will not make this play live, though they may disguise the barren and commercial mind of its producer. But here the elves were functional; part of the fairy scenery. And the scenery itself, Shifrin's, was organic. Before a word was spoken, Nature showed off to the audience. A thick wood, a silvery lake, the silent figures of a boy and a girl in love, all moving out of the darkness, while the stars gathered to announce the title of the play. Then beyond the lake, daylight grew and spread, wiping the wood and lake and lovers away, and drawing out a great panorama of Athens.

Was it Athens? Or was it Arden? Or was it the whole world of Nature, with man, the maker of miracles, her unnatural son-conqueror? One hundred and twenty-five human beings controlled her; and she was their copyist. Even the fairies were human; they had human feelings, they made very human mistakes. Puck was no fey thing; but a kind of cross between a rumbustious village lad and a dog, that uttered cries of pleasure and rubbed his head on his master's leg. And—legitimately in a dream—he bounced. His leaps were preternaturally agile, thanks partly to Zinoviev, who played him, and partly to rubber cushions camouflaged in the forest floor.

And there was something rubberoid in the scenery—not only in the wood, which being a dream-wood was always on the point of turning into something else, yet, because of a core of argument in the dream, never did. And even the working-class quarter of Elizabethan Athens had something fungoid in its decayed architecture. For *The Dream* has a universality of locale that cannot be defined as Athens or London, Stratford or Moscow, and yet is perfectly actualistic

about each. And it is the new attitude of the Soviet Theatre to such classics, that it seeks to express not their universality, but their uniqueness. Only by such a great man of letters, only with such a fine sense of the stage, only in that period, only under such conditions, could this play have had this meaning and this shape; and we, in our study of him, are bound to find the meaning and the shape that our period, our conditions, make us require. For going to the theatre is a social act; and the social implications of Shakespeare are doubly important in the U.S.S.R. Shakespeare lived in an individualistic age; but he was not, spiritually, an individualist. If he sought anything in that frame of mind, it was understanding of man; and even that he had to share. But he is concerned with individuals; and his conception of their destiny is bound up with their characters, as their characters are bound up with the other individuals round them.

In many plays he shows specifically, for instance, how the exile of a lawful monarch or the assertion of a tyrant are evils that affect the community—in no rhetorical or sentimental sense. Nowhere, perhaps, more clearly than in *Macbeth*, which has had two recent revivals, one at the Kirov Theatre, one at the Pushkin Theatre, Leningrad.

An absorbing account of the Soviet approach to this play has been given by the critic B. Reich, in which he shows that the absence of the usual number of historical figures here throws the emphasis on the atmosphere of the Scotland in which Macbeth lived. In the first actual scene we hear of rebels and traitors conspiring for their own ends; and this is maintained throughout. For my part, Reich's article explains two things that no other critic has treated adequately: why such intense feeling as in the 'Nothing became him' speech should be thrown away on a minor character like the late Thane of Cawdor; and why almost every person in the play is afraid, deeply afraid, of something.

"The whole country is poisoned with treachery, dissimulation, hypocrisy; and it is quite wrong to represent Macbeth the traitor and hypocrite as an exception," Reich explains.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Teatr*, 1941, No. 1, pp. 74-85.

" Such was Scotland under the Good King Duncan. Under Macbeth it became Hell." For Shakespeare creates the horrible spectacle of a man turning from a comparatively sympathetic dreamer into a rather pathetic sort of murderer, and thence into a tyrant bolstered up in an artificial self-confidence that frees him from all restraint on what he does. And therefrom he becomes " a man brought utterly to nothing in a castle where people wander about the passages at night tormented by uneasy consciences, and only their fear of the tyrant keeps his servants within its walls. . . . It is a deep analysis of the complete spiritual decay of a criminal."

Something of the baleful atmosphere of the play is visible already in the set itself. Never has the Scottish baronial style of architecture been so faithfully, yet so brilliantly, used to indicate the twisted and cruel nature of the civilisation that built and sheltered in it. And the events and personalities of our own day show us that this attitude to *Macbeth* is no literary or professional gesture, and starts from no desire either to 'be different' or to 'toe the line.' The meaning of the play is as true of Germany today in terms of Shakespeare as the terms of Shakespeare were true of the Scotland he was using for his play. And all through his studies of tyrants or degenerates, doomed lovers or inflated cowards, too trusting hearts or too soft ones, runs like a steel wire his practical affection, and regard, and understanding toward the ordinary man. The ordinary man, in his weakness and strength, as Lenin saw and worked for him; in his infinite variety and his modest desire to be himself in the time in which he is born; we scarcely know whether it is Shakespeare or the Soviet Union that we are describing.

No wonder the Russians call the method of their new theatre ' Socialist Realism.'

APRIL 1942.

## APPENDIX I

### The New Building of the Central Theatre of the Red Army, Moscow

*See Frontispiece for ground-plan*

THE new building is situated in Commune Square, for years now associated with not only the Theatre, but also the Museum, of the Red Army; its designers are Academician K. S. Alabyan and Architect V. N. Simbirtsev, working in consultation with the management, so as to obtain the most flexible and comprehensive stage conditions possible. The auditorium contains stalls, first circle, gallery, and boxes. The fore-stage is connected 'organically' with the gangways of the stalls, bow-fronted, and can if necessary be extended by roofing over the orchestra pit (which seats eighty). Rostrums can provide a 'reserve' fore-stage, measuring 17 by 3 metres. Slides in the proscenium allow the lighting equipment to take advantage of its full height. The frame of the stage opening can be easily altered for grand meetings, conferences, or crowd-scenes.

As will be seen from a study of the ground plan, although the exterior of this beautiful building has the shape of the five-pointed star of the Soviet Union—a badge worn by the Red Fighting Forces—it is constructed round an interior decahedron, to three sides of which the auditorium itself is ingeniously fitted as an irregular hexagon—an admirable shape, and much better for an audience than the square, horse-shoe, magnet, pentagon, or rather old-fashioned designs.

The stage measures 38.50 metres by 30 metres; height, 33.50 metres. The stage opening is 24 by 14½ metres. There are recesses, measuring 16 by 20 metres by 15 high, fitted with floats that are mounted on the stage level. These

can run out three-dimensional scenery from both sides. The *arrière-scène* is 27 metres deep—making the maximum depth from fore-stage to stage-wall no less than 62 metres—so that real motor-cars, detachments of cavalry, and similar features have plenty of room to manoeuvre. The great height and the recesses at the side ensure quick changes of scenery, whether flats, act-drops, or three-dimensional constructions. Scene-docks give fire-proof accommodation for three or four complete productions simultaneously. Wood-and-metal workshops, studios for sculpture, properties, etc., are situated in the basement, communicating with the stage by lift, crane, and traps. Here the accommodation can undertake two whole productions simultaneously.

The scene-painters' studio is equipped with special gantries that enable sets to be surveyed and lit under conditions approximate to a lighting rehearsal.

The actors' entrance is placed well down-stage, which not only permits an orderly clearing of the acting area for quick changes, but is also useful for curtain calls and fore-stage scenes. The dressing-rooms, which can hold 250 people, are placed at the sides of the recesses on four floors. On each floor there is a foyer for visitors, with a buffet. Every dressing-room has hot and cold water and showers.<sup>1</sup>

The rehearsal-room has a stage with a proscenium opening, 24 metres wide, with lateral reserves and the necessary apparatus and stores. It can be used as a concert-hall, seating 500.

The stage fittings are mechanised as fully as possible. Hitherto special apparatus had to be made for each production, and then taken to pieces by hand and stored in unsuitable conditions. The new building does away with this.

The stage-floor is organised on a new principle. Previously constructions mounted on the revolving stage had had no connection with the stationary portions of the set. On the new stage the turntable is in three levels, 26 metres in diameter. In one-half of this turntable (up-stage in the plan, which shows the normal position) there is a smaller turntable

<sup>1</sup> Shades of Shaftesbury Avenue!

included in the larger, the floor of which is divided into three quadrilateral sections, capable of being raised to varying heights as rostrums. The floor of the other half is divided into a whole system of such rostrum-sections (measuring 3 by 3 metres in the middle), which can be raised to a height of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  metres above the stage level or sunk to a depth of 2 metres.

The system extends off the turntable into the stationary portions of the stage-floor, giving adjustable levels over an area of 350 square metres. The amphitheatre so created for conferences, etc., gives a seating capacity for 1,000 people. The acting-area can be broken up into endless variations of level, and any combination can be preset and operated electrically. Electricity indeed is the key to the whole building, its full electrical load being 4,200 kilowatts, of which 55 only are used for front of house and stores. Kino-projection facilities are available.

There is a stage model, one-twentieth natural size, for the producer to play with and experiment on.

Design and execution were Russian throughout.

## APPENDIX II

# The Debt of the National Republics to Stalin

ALTHOUGH the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the no less successful guidance of the Soviet Union since its foundation in 1922 were due primarily to the intellect and ability of Lenin, it is certain that the present strength and solidarity of the Soviet Union would not be as they are, but for the vision and determination of Stalin. A Georgian himself, and therefore aware from the inside of what Russian imperialism meant to the peoples it exploited, it was he who as early as 1913 collaborated with Lenin in formulating the principles of the Bolshevik party on the question of the nationalities, passed as a Resolution in August 1913.

"The other Soviet specialists in the matter recognise that they learned what they know about it by reading his articles, which appeared during the years preceding the War in the review *Просвещение* (Enlightenment)."<sup>1</sup>

Armed with this authority, it was he who on May 12 (April 29), 1917, presented a Report on the National Question and the ensuing Resolution which was forthwith adopted. The conflict between the Finns and the Russian Provisional Government was then at its height. After analysing shortly the varying degrees of minority or national frustrations from Tsarist Russia, through the British Empire, down to a negligible degree in Switzerland, Stalin then asserted the perfect right of the Finnish people to secede from the post-Tsarist, pre-Bolshevik Russian Empire—an attitude he maintained, and still maintains; although when Finland became a menace to the security of the Union through German influence, the Union under his guidance took such steps as were necessary to avert that danger. Further, he extended this right to secede. "I personally would be

<sup>1</sup> Henri Barbusse, *Life of Stalin* (English edition, 1935), p. 95.

opposed to the secession of Transcaucasia " (which includes Georgia). . . . " But if, nevertheless, the peoples of Transcaucasia were to demand secession they would, of course, secede, and would not encounter opposition from us."<sup>1</sup> Then, after disposing of certain alternative plans that were being advocated by Bolsheviks, he proceeded to put the Resolution,<sup>2</sup> which on the one hand rejected the annexation of the nationalities and confirmed the right of any to secede, but on the other hand foresaw that to give complete national cultural autonomy under National Diets at that time would be to throw out these backward nations as prey to bourgeois culture, and undermine the international solidarity of the workers. Accordingly it proposed:

- (a) Recognition of the right of nations to secession (from the proposed federal union of national governments);
- (b) Regional autonomy for nations remaining within the given state;
- (c) Special legislation guaranteeing freedom of development for national minorities;
- (d) A single indivisible proletarian body, a single party for the proletarians of all nationalities of the given State.<sup>3</sup>

Important details were the abolition of a single compulsory language (Russian) and the right to speak the local language, even where this would be the right of only a minority or a racial group; the determination of national boundaries by the local population; the abolition of tutelage from above.

Following this April conference, Stalin became a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the party. But his principles were challenged by Pyatakov and others, even though Lenin himself had drafted the Resolution (with a few amendments by Stalin). After the Bolshevik Party came to power in October, Stalin was elected People's Commissar for the Nationalities, a post he held till 1923.

<sup>1</sup> Stalin, *Articles and Speeches, March–October 1917*. (Leningrad, 1925), reprinted in translation in the English volume *Lenin–Stalin 1917* (Moscow, 1938), p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Given in full in the same volume, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Summary by E. Yaroslavsky, *Landmarks in the Life of Stalin* (London, 1942), p. 96.

One of the first legislative acts of the new Government was the Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia. Here follows the text in full:

“ The October Revolution of the workers and peasants began under the general banner of liberation.

“ The *peasants* are being liberated from the power of the landlords, for landed proprietorship no longer exists—it has been abolished. The *soldiers and sailors* are being liberated from the power of the despotic generals, for the generals will henceforth be elected and be subject to recall. The *workers* are being liberated from the caprice and despotism of the capitalists, for henceforth workers' control over the mills and factories will be established. Everything that is living and virile is being liberated from detested fetters.

“ There remain only the *nations of Russia*, which have suffered and are suffering from oppression and despotism, and whose liberation must be begun immediately and accomplished decisively and for all time.

“ In the era of Tsarism the nations of Russia were systematically incited one against another. The results of this policy are well known: massacres and pogroms on the one hand, and the enslavement of the nations on the other.

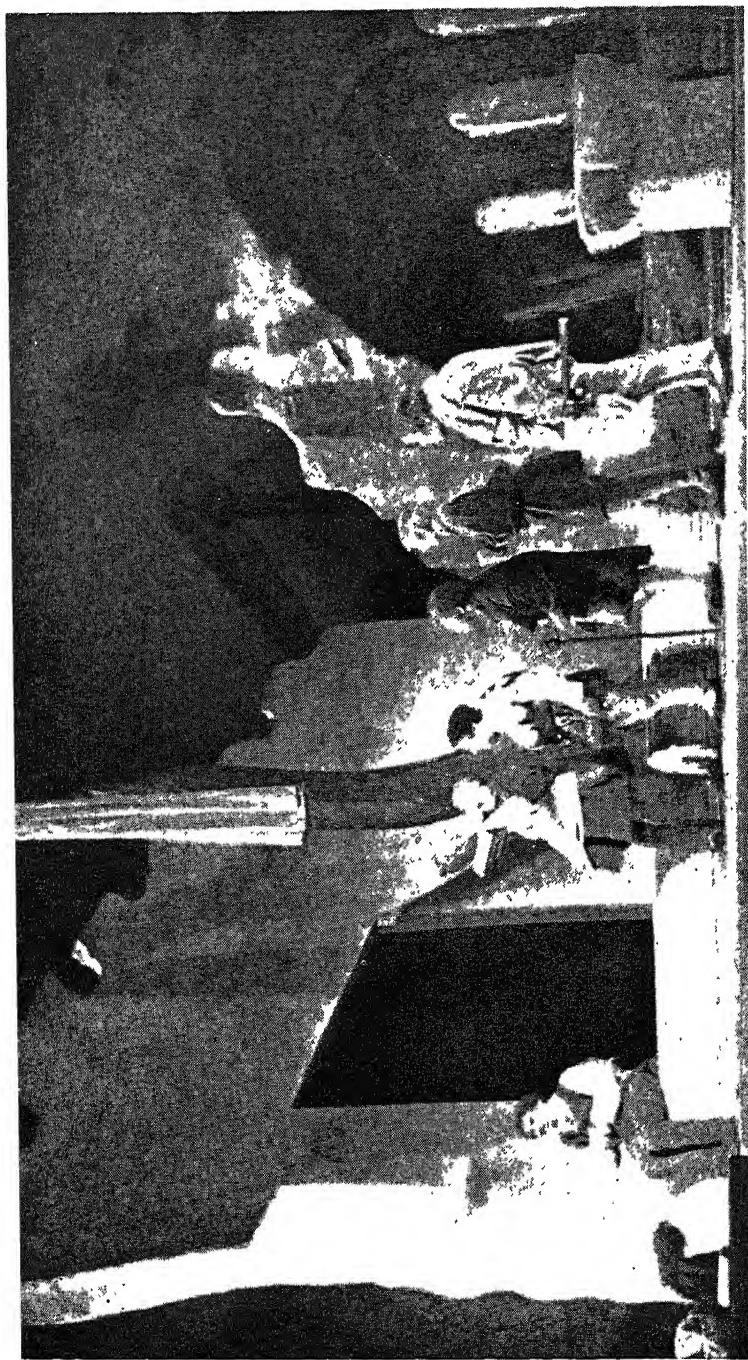
“ This shameful policy of incitement has ended, and there must be no return to it. Henceforth, it must be replaced by a policy of *voluntary and honest* alliance between the nations of Russia.

“ In the period of imperialism, after the February Revolution, when the power passed into the hands of the Cadet bourgeoisie, the unconcealed policy of incitement gave place to a policy of cowardly distrust of the nations of Russia, a policy of pinpricks and provocation, concealed by the verbal proclamations of the ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ of the nations. The results of this policy are well known: intensification of national enmity and undermining of mutual confidence.

“ This unworthy policy of lying and distrust, of pinpricks and provocation, must be ended. It must henceforth be



“An anthem to Man and to Love”: two scenes from Popov’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.  
See overleaf.  
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The dream quality of the wood spreads into Elizabethan Athens. Even the working-class quarter there has an architecture slightly fungoid.

replaced by a frank and honest policy that will lead to *complete mutual confidence* among the nations of Russia.

“ It is only by such confidence that an honest and durable alliance between the nations of Russia can be secured.

“ It is only by such an alliance that the workers and peasants of the nations of Russia can be welded together into a single revolutionary force capable of withstanding all attempts of the imperialist, annexationist bourgeoisie.

“ It was on these grounds that in June 1917 the First Congress of Soviets proclaimed the right of the nations of Russia to freedom of self-determination.

“ In October 1917 the Second Congress of Soviets endorsed this inalienable right of the nations of Russia in a more decided and definite form.

“ In pursuance of the will of these Congresses, the Council of Peoples’ Commissars has decided to base its activities with regard to the nationalities of Russia on the following principles:

“ 1. *The equality and sovereignty of the nations of Russia.*

“ 2. *The right of the nations of Russia to freedom of self-determination, including the right to secede and form independent States.*

“ 3. *Abolition of all national and national-religious privileges and restrictions whatsoever.*

“ 4. *Freedom of development for the national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.*

“ The specific decrees necessitated by this will be drawn up immediately after a Commission on National Affairs has been formed.

“ In the name of the Russian Republic,

“ JOSEPH DJUGASHVILI-STALIN,

“ *People’s Commissar of National Affairs.*

“ V. ULYANOV (LENIN),

“ *Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars.*

“ November 2, 1917.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Lenin-Stalin*, pp. 638-9. Reprinted in translation from *Pravda*, No. 178, Nov. 16 (3), 1917.

This was conceived and drafted by Stalin, as was the Address to the Toiling Moslems of Russia and the East, signed jointly by himself and Lenin and published in *Pravda*, No. 196, December 5 (November 22), 1917.<sup>1</sup> This appealed to them to support the Resolution, and included the following paragraph:

"Henceforth your faith and your customs, your national and cultural institutions, are proclaimed to be free and inviolable. Order your national life freely and unrestrictedly. It is your right. Know that your rights, like the rights of all the nations of Russia, are safeguarded by the whole might of the Revolution and its organs, the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies."

It must be recalled that most of these nations had had very little opportunity to order their national lives—or faiths—their own for centuries. One conqueror after another had controlled them, with different cultures and faiths. Nor was Stalin here stating a self-evident theme. On the contrary, there were two other 'deviations' of policy proposed: the deviation of internationalism, which would have made all culture and government uniform, and the deviation of nationalism, which would have resulted in chaos. Stalin's solution was the only correct one. As a son of a nationality himself, he rejected the former. How right he was not to accept the latter, events themselves showed: for on the removal of the Tsarist and Kerensky imperialisms, the national bourgeois Governments promptly adopted the plan Trotsky had attempted unsuccessfully in May 1918<sup>2</sup> and appealed to the Allied Armies to 'restore order' by armed intervention, thus further delaying the self-determination of the nationalities by several years. On the other hand, Stalin opposed the conception of nationalities as 'Asiatic,' the 'colonising tendencies' of some of the Bolshevik leaders, who favoured sending Russian workers and propagandists to direct and settle everything according to Russian ideas, with

<sup>1</sup> In *Lenin-Stalin*, pp. 664-6.

<sup>2</sup> According to Bruce Lockhart's secret report sent to Colonel Robins of the American Red Cross. See M. Philips Price, *Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1921), p. 276.

the result that the native population would be ‘neglected by Socialism.’<sup>1</sup>

The situation is made clear if we remember that the Bolshevik Revolution was headed by the Proletariat, and Russia and all her subject peoples were primarily peasant communities—nine-tenths of which were defined by Stalin as “middle strata—the peasantry and the petty labouring populace of the cities.”<sup>2</sup> The Paris commune fell because it antagonised these middle strata, especially the peasantry. Basing himself on Marx in a letter to Engels, Stalin insisted that the October Revolution must win over these middle strata. He argued<sup>3</sup> that in the nationalities they were oppressed not only as peasantry and labouring populace of cities, but also as nationalities—“i.e. as workers of a definite state-hood, language, culture, manner of life, customs, and habits.” So, and only in this sense, the proletarian revolution must realise not only itself and a ‘peasant war,’ but also a ‘national war.’

In 1922 Stalin was elected General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party, a new post, and one which he still holds. In December of the same year the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was founded, and “his name is indissolubly bound up with that great historical event.”<sup>4</sup> He it was who drew up the Treaty of Union, and it was on his report that this was adopted by the First Congress of Soviets on December 30. It was a realisation of Lenin’s principles, stated in 1915<sup>5</sup>:

“We demand the freedom of self-determination, i.e.

<sup>1</sup> Barbusse, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> In an article in *Pravda*, November 7, 1923, reprinted in translation in *A Handbook of Marxism* (London, 1935), pp. 821–6. Lenin defined the ‘middle peasant’ as one who does not exploit the labour of others, but works or lives by his own labour—i.e. neither poor peasant nor kulak. The number of these middle peasants greatly increased after the expropriation of the landowners. Lenin and Stalin insisted that these must be won over to the proletarian revolution in due course, when they were satisfied with it; the Trotskyite opposition denied that such a thing was possible. See Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. VIII, pp. 154–207.

<sup>3</sup> *Lenin-Stalin*, p. 824.

<sup>4</sup> Barbusse, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> In an article replying to Radek, November 1915. Lenin: *Selected Works*, Vol. V (Moscow, 1935), p. 289.

independence, i.e. the freedom of secession for the oppressed nations, not because we cherish the ideal of small States, but, on the contrary, because we are in favour of large States and of the closer unity and even the fusion of nations, but on a truly democratic, truly international basis, which is *inconceivable* without the freedom of secession. In the same way that Marx in 1869 demanded the separation of Ireland, not for the purpose of splitting England but for the subsequent free alliance of Ireland with England, not for the sake of 'justice for Ireland' but in the interests of the revolutionary struggle of the English proletariat, so we at the present time consider the refusal of the Socialists of Russia to demand freedom of self-determination for the nations, in the sense indicated by us above, a direct betrayal of democracy, internationalism, and Socialism."

For, as Marx and Engels said, "No people oppressing other peoples can be free." Hence the Stalin Constitution of 1936, of which Molotov uttered proud words when it was first proposed in November 1936 at an extraordinary 8th Congress of Soviets:

"Not a single bourgeois country, even if it has existed for centuries, has been able to find a correct solution of its own national problem, any more than this was possible for old bourgeois-landlord Russia. The solution was possible in our country, thanks to the victory of Socialism, which ensured the possibility of introducing consistent democracy, genuine equality of rights for the nationalities, and enabled the State to display special solicitude for the weaker and formerly particularly oppressed national minorities."<sup>1</sup>

It is not unnatural that the drama of such minorities is Socialist; and the popularity of Stalin among them, great.

<sup>1</sup> V. M. Molotov, *The Constitution of Socialism*, a speech, etc. (Moscow, 1937), p. 19.

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